FORGOTTEN REALMS

THE BEST OF THE

REALMS

Book II



The Stories of

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Forgotten Realms
Anthologies, Best of the Realms II
By Ed Greenwood

Introduction

NOT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL OF FEASTS

I first strung together some rather bad sword and sorcery stories I'd written (at the tender ages of six and seven; I was one of those "bad when young" children), and decided I'd created a world that I'd call. . . The Forgotten Realms! Yeah, that's got zing to it!—almost forty years ago. I've worked on it every year since, back before there was a Dungeons & Dragons® game, right up through the hundreds of DRAGON" magazine articles, and game sourcebooks, and novels, until now.

Along the way, the Realms has built up a fair bit of history. A lot of it's there thanks to gamers and readers who've come to love the Realms and wanted to know "how things got that way."

And a little of it is there because I intended to put it there all along.

This is one tiny bit of the latter sort, a fleeting glimpse of what things were like "way back when," in the days when Elminster Aumar, prince of Athalantar, the Realm of the Stag, was but a lad of twelve. It was intended to be the Prologue of Elminster: The Making of a Mage, but vanished therefrom due to lack of space.

As Elminster said several ages ago, "There are only so many pages in any book."

So let's look back at the evening of the eleventh day of Eleint, in the Year of the Flaming Forests (224 DR), and visit a castle long vanished, in a land long swept away into the echoing host of empty names only sages treasure...

NOT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL OF FEASTS

It was the hour of the Casting of the Cloak, when the goddess Shar hurled her vast garment of purple darkness, all a-glitter with stars, across the sky. The last rosy embers of

the day glimmered on the long hair of a lone rider who came out of the west, lengthening shadows creeping ahead of her. It had been a cool day, and the night promised to be clear and cold.

The woman looked around at the gathering nightdark as she rode. Her black, liquid eyes were startlingly large and framed by arched black brows—looks that betrayed a stern power and keen wits at odds with her demure beauty. Most men did not look past her regal figure and the warm, honey-brown tresses curling around her pert, bone-white face. Queens might lust after her proud beauty—one at least did, of a certainty. Yet as she rode along, her

large eyes held no pride... only sadness. Wildfires had raged across all these lands in the spring, leaving behind legions of charred and blackened leafless spars instead of the lush green beauty she recalled. Such fond memories were all that was left of Halangorn Forest now.

As dusk came down on the dusty road, a wolf howled somewhere away to the north.

The call was answered from near at hand, but the lone rider showed no fear. Her calm would have raised the eyebrows of the hardened knights who dared ride that road only in large, well-armed patrols—and their wary surprise would not have ended there.

The lady rode easily, a long cloak swirling around her. Time and again gusts of wind made it flap forward around her hips. Only a fool-at-arms would hamper her sword arm so thoroughly—but this tall, lean lady rode the perilous road without even a sword at her hip.

A patrol of knights would have judged her either a madwoman or a sorceress, and reached for their blades accordingly. They'd not have been wrong.

The sigil worked in silvern threads on the shoulders of her cloak was not unknown in Faerun; those linked circles of magefire proclaimed her to be the sorceress Myrjala, called "Darkeyes," feared for her wild ways as much as for the

might of her magic. More farmers and townsfolk loved her than did proud lords in castles; she'd been known to hurl down cruel barons and plundering knights like a vengeful whirlwind, leaving their blazing bodies as a dark warning to others. In some places she was most unwelcome.

As night's full gloom fell on the road, Myrjala slowed her horse, turned in her saddle, and did off her cloak. She spoke a single soft word, and the cloak twisted in her hands, changing hue from its usual dark green to russet. The silver mage-sigil slithered and writhed like an angry snake and became a pair of entwined golden trumpets.

The transformation did not end with the cloak. Long curls darkened and shrank about Myrjala's shoulders—shoulders suddenly alive with roiling, moving humps of muscle as they broadened. The hands that drew the cloak back on were hairy

and stubby-fingered. They plucked a scabbarded blade out from the packroll behind the saddle, and belted it on. Thus armed, the elegantly-bearded man in the saddle arranged his cloak so its newly-shaped herald's badge could be clearly seen. He then scratched his nose thoughtfully, listened to the wolf howl again—closer now—and calmly urged his mount forward at a trot, over one last hill. Where the most feared sorceress in these lands might be met with arrows and ready blades, a lord herald was always welcome.

The guards were lighting the lamps over the gate as the herald's horse came clottering over the wooden drawbridge. The badge on his cloak and tabard were recognized, and he was greeted with quiet courtesy by the gate-guards. A bell tolled once within, and the Knight of the Gate bade him hasten in to the evening feast with a wave of his gauntlet and the rote words: "Be welcome in Morlin Castle, if ye come in peace."

The herald bowed his head in the usual silent response.

" 'Tis a long way from Tavaray, Lord Herald. Ye must know hunger," the knight added less formally, helping him down

from his mount. The herald took a few slow steps with the stiffness of one long in the saddle, and smiled thinly.
Startlingly dark eyes rose to meet the knight's smile. "Oh, I've come much farther than that," the herald said softly. He nodded a wordless farewell and strode away into the castle without hesitation. He walked like a man who knew the way—and his welcome—well.
The Knight of the Gate watched him go, his face expressionless in puzzlement. An armsman nearby leaned close and murmured, "No spurs ... and no esquires or armsmen ... what manner of herald is this?"
The Knight of the Gate shrugged. "If he lost them on the road, or there's some other tale of interest, we'll know it soon enough. See to his horse." He turned—and stiffened in fresh surprise.
The herald's horse was standing close by, watching him, for all the world as if it were listening to their talk. As it met his startled look, it nodded and took a half-step forward to bring its reins smoothly to the armsman's hand. The two
men exchanged startled looks, and then the armsman rather warily led the horse away.
The knight watched it for a moment, then shrugged and strode back to the mouth of the gate. There'd doubtless be much talk on watch later, whatever befell.
Out in the night, nearby, a wolf howled again. One of the horses snorted and stamped nervously. The knight cast a look back over his shoulder and saw the herald's mount calmly looking from side to side as it was led off to the inner stables. He shook his head and went up the stairs to his post above the gate.
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In the hours after dusk, within the vast and smoky high hall of Morlin Castle, Lord Breiyr sat at ease at the great curved feasting table facing the dance and play of the hearth-fire. The spit-frames, their sizzling burdens well seared, had been drawn away from the relentless heat of the leaping flames,

whose amber shadows danced on the walls all around the seated company.

That company was only three in number, for all the steaming, shining-plattered feast laid between them.

Plentiful and splendid it stretched, studded with a fair dozen roasts adorning the raised dishes-of-honor. Between these mountains of meat stood a small forest of lesser, shinier vessels. Some lay open-topped, displaying sauces that sparkled in the firelight like dark pools with gems shining in their depths. Ever-curling wisps of steam rose from deep silver bowls that held innards in gravy. These were set amid gleaming brass plates of honey-laced fruit skewers and tall, slender decanters of red wine. Reflected flames flickered in their ruby depths, casting back leaping red shadows on the faces of the diners.

At the center of the curved feasting table sat the Lord of Morlin, Baron of Steeping Falls and Lord Protector of the Sword Hills. He was a stout man, an old lion of a warrior come to the gray shadow of his years. In the bright days of his youth he'd gone up against ore hordes, hobgoblin hosts, and warbands of giants—and even now, the songs of the wandering bards remembered well his valor. Some called him a simple man, rough of manner and speech, and it is true he had little liking for subtlety or deceit, and much love for good food and mead, and hale friends to share both with. He could still get into his old, scarred armor, and heavy rings of beaten gold adorned his long fingers, knobbed and scarred where they'd been broken by heavy sword-blows through his gauntlets or cut by seeking blades when those gauntlets had failed. The lord's keen eyes darted under bushy brows from one of his guests to the other—for he was not enjoying his meal, and they were the cause.

An elderly male servant in a worn doublet deftly set down a full goblet and a bottle of the chilled, emerald-hued mint wine from Ardeep at one end of the table. The haughty, sharp features of the elf who sat there softened momentarily

in thanks. The brief smile was dazzling, and the servant almost paused to gawk at the tall, sinuous high elf-lord, whose large silver eyes glimmered with a look somehow too sly for an elf. And yet his pointed ears, his fine bronze skin, and his golden-blond hair—a mane as long as a maid's, pulled back severely to the nape of his neck in a filigreed pin that winked with fine gems and spell-dazzle—proclaimed him one of the eldest and haughtiest race of elves. He wore a white silk shirt with an overtunic of gilden shimmerweave, and lounged at ease in his chair as he reached for the new-brought wine.

At the same time, a serving-lady of like age set a bedewed talltankard of beer in front of the diner at the other end of the table: a broad and broken-nosed dwarf whose scarred face was flinty as he glared unwinking across the room at the elf-lord.

The elf allowed an answering sneer to fall for an instant across his lips, then turned his head pointedly away to address his host at the center of the table. "Are your crops good this summertide, my Lord?"

Lord Breiyr's ruddy face split into a relieved smile. His two distinguished guests had stiffened at first sight of each other, and he dared not offend either, for all their rudenesses. Both were important folk—barons, or better—in their own realms.

Old realms, and proud; lands wealthy enough to beggar all the human holds in the Northlands. Lands whose folk openly looked down on their newcome human neighbors. No doubt, were he lord of either, he'd do so too. He'd also keep a wary eye on the battle-strength and doings of the lords of men... as both of his guests were no doubt charged to. A cruel whim of the gods must have brought them both to his gates on the same evening. So, at least, he hoped.

The stout, red-faced lord looked warily from one guest to another, then turned to answer the elf. His two guests had traded more than enough elaborate, cutting insults over

wine before dusk. If they'd now decided to be civil to each other long enough to enjoy the feast, he'd best seize the opportunity to set them both at ease and make them feel welcome. More than that, it was his duty. Not for the first time, he wished his smooth-tongued wife were still alive. She'd have known so much better what to say.

Lord Breiyr rumbled with friendly uncertainty, like an awakening dragon deciding how best to greet its mate, and said, "We're hopeful of a good harvest, my lord Falaeve—though we haven't the way of working with the land that your tree-tenders have." He turned his head hastily to smile at the glowering dwarf, and said, "Nor have we any wisdom at growing things in sheltered depths—nor any caverns near, this close to the river." He left a little pause, but neither guest responded, so he gathered himself to fill the silence with just a touch of weariness, like a patient bear after a fish has darted away from its paws yet again, and added, "So long as none go hungry this winter, with so many trees gone."

"I've never seen such fires before," the dwarf grunted around the edge of the talltankard. He set it down firmly on the board before him and added darkly, "There's talk that careless magic—or worse, malicious spells—started it."

"Talk?" The hawk-nosed elf leaned forward. His tone was light, but the word seemed to flash like a flourished blade. "Talk among whom?"

"Dwarves, of course," the bearded stalwart said deliberately, his beard jutting forward as he leaned across the laden board before him. "Who else would I listen to—or put any credence in the words of?"

The elf raised his shoulders and brows together in an elaborate shrug and pointedly turned his head away again to address their host. The dwarf growled warningly, but whatever unpleasantness might have followed was lost forever in - the scrape of the steward's staff of office.

All three at the table turned at the sound, and the elf's face

froze in disapproval; Lord Breiyr had named his own daughter to the stewardship rather than some old, loyal warrior. Her clear tones rang out in the cavernous hall as she grounded her staff hollowly on the flagstones thrice, and said, "My Lord of Morlin! I am come with a guest we welcome within our walls: Huntinghorn, Herald of Tavaray!"

There was a faint murmur among the servants who stood about the walls of the hall and were bent to the spits before the hearth; lord heralds were rare visitors this far up the Delimibyr. Still, there'd been talk of risings and unrest in the wake of the devastating fires in the spring, and troubled times always brought messengers and envoys out, both the great and the small. Curious eyes sought the shadows behind the steward as Lord Breiyr, in glad relief at this unlooked-for reprieve from verbal dueling, said eagerly, "Let him be welcome indeed in Morlin, so long as he attend us here, and share our feast! Bring him as soon as his needs of the journey are met, that we may speak together, and share good cheer!"

The steward bowed her head, but did not hasten out. She stepped back and aside, and a dark-clad man, elegant and bearded, strode from the shadows behind her, straight to the chair of the Lord.

There he bowed, and his sword flashed out. It caught the light of the leaping flames as he made the full salute—most often tendered to kings or great lords—to the Lord of Morlin Castle, who blushed with pleasure amid the awed, pleased murmur.

The watching elven lord drew himself up in even greater disapproval at this, glaring at the young, bearded herald—who met his gaze for a deliberate instant with black eyes that

held hard, cold disdain, before dropping them again to smile almost fondly at the stout old Lord.

"Down by the sea, I've heard only good things about Morlin, and when night finds me here on my travels, I come in and

find the words all true," the herald said in a light yet strong voice. "My Lord, I am pleased to know you. Peace and good fortune attend this fair hall."
Lord Breiyr rumbled with pleasure and spread a large hand to indicate the food. "As we are honored by your presence, Lord Herald. Be welcome, and be aware we know pleasure at your company. Will you sit with us and feast? This night my humble hall already holds two distinguished guests: Arthlach, Axelord of the Hold of Westdelve in Ammarindar"—the dwarf nodded gravely, talltankard in hand—"and Highlord Falaeve, of Siluvanede. We were just talking of the unfortunate fires this spring past, and of what may have caused them."
The young man nodded smoothly as he descended into a chair hastily made ready for him to the Lord's right. "Rumors of dark magic?"
Highlord Falaeve did not quite sneer. "So the—good—Axelord"—he hesitated only an instant at the descriptive word, long enough for all in the hall to clearly hear it, yet not quite long enough for the dwarf to take open offense—"believes, or do his companions among the Stout Folk. What say you, my Lord Herald?"
The man and the elf both openly studied each other—and when their eyes met, there was a greater tension in the room than the Lord Breiyr had ever felt in his home before. He paled and groped at his belt for a sword that was not there.
The man who was not a man looked across the curve of the great feasting-table, into eyes that were proud and cold. A twist was playing about the lips of the high elf-lord that was not quite a sneer, but made his assumption of superiority clear to everyone in the hall. The silver griffon of Siluvanede was worked in gold wire on the gem-adorned bracers the elf wore and they flashed as he slowly raised his slim crystal goblet of mint wine to his lips, without ever taking his eyes from the herald's.
Highlord Falaeve had stared down many a man before—

haughtier, stronger men than this puppy in a tabard. The man wore the crossed trumpets of Huntinghorn, and must have come as one of the regal envoys of the coastal human lords—Elember, perhaps. The man was sleek and slim and wore a neatly-trimmed, short beard that curled about his chin like the fur of a hunting cat. A smooth courtier—the sort of man who thought himself both subtle and clever.

Highlord Falaeve smiled slightly and put his wine down again, making the smallest of signs with one long, slim finger. The servant saw and glided forward silently to refill the goblet.

The silence had lasted so long that it could almost be heard—the high skirling of ready swords, jangling above the crackle of the hearth-fire. Or perhaps it was just the sound of taut, restive nerves.

"My—good—Highlord of Siluvanede," Huntinghorn said softly, precisely duplicating the elf-lord's deliberate hesitation, "I do not term such beliefs mere 'rumors.' It has been my misfortune to see—in a scrying pool cast by my good friend the Aeltagarr, whom I know you revere as the most senior sorceress of your realm—" he paused, and the elf bowed his head stiffly, angry eyes glittering in a face that had paled slightly,"foul sorcery worked to butcher your kinfolk and hurl back the woods, so as to expand the borders of a human realm and win it space for more farms."

"And what human mage worked this destruction?" Highlord Falaeve asked, voice very soft. "One of those irresponsible children of Netheril?"

Somewhere in the hall, a servant gasped audibly. The rise of Netheril was told of in half a hundred cradle-tales and folk rumors; its magical might had kept even the spellstrong elven lords and the numberless, savage ores at bay when men first came to the North, and though its might had long passed, it remained a shining memory—a memory, the priests said, that had been passed down for more than a thousand winters... the lives of thirty fathers and sons. Could

this elf-lord be as old as that?
Yet the herald was shaking his head. "Your pardon, lord," he said to Breiyr, and then turned back to set calm words before the elf. "Nay, Highlord. No lich nor immortal Netherese sorcerer-king. Nay—'twas a man high in the councils of a land near this one: the realm of Athalantar."
Lord Breiyr gaped, and there was a stir in the hall, a wordless rustling of cloth as servants leaned or stepped forward to hear better. The elf-lord's lips thinned. "Enough foolishness," he said. "That is a land of simple farmers and boar-hunting swordswingers whose young king has had the sense to gather in a few landless hedge-wizards to advise him. They've neither the magical skill nor the want to work such destroying magic."
The herald smiled without humor. "So I, too, thought. And yet they've broken much of the burned lands with their plows this summer, and work at it still."
"What man would not take advantage of such a happening? Men wait about, and rush in to seize or slay when they find weakness or opportunity. It is their way." The elf-lord spoke coldly—and in the stillness that followed his bitter words, all in the hall saw the dwarf nod his head, slowly and reluctantly.
"Aye," Lord Breiyr rumbled hesitantly. "The boar-hunting princes of the Stag? 'Tis hard to believe."
The herald spread his hands. "I saw what I saw. Do you tell me the Aeltagarr deceived me, working her scrying falsely? I've seen such spells worked many times before, and know them well; there was no deceit in her casting. Moreover, she did not know who the man was in her pool. I did, and have spent much time since then trying to find other tellings and signs to prove her right or wrong."
"And?" The elf-lord's soft tones were a silken challenge.
"I work still. I have found certain things that may prove her right. Nothing that proves the other."
"Yet," the Highlord said in soft dismissal.

"Would you cry the Aeltagarr false, my lord?" The herald spoke mildly, but there was an edge of rebuke in his tone that made the elf flush. "I would not like to report that when next I see her."

Highlord Falaeve waved a long-fingered hand in dismissal. "Enough! One foolish or careless wizard o'erreaching himself, then. Not a plot hatched in such a simple realm ... a good neighbor to these folk here." He waved at the hall around, and won a few nods among the servants along the walls. "I'd not hear such slander against a realm entire, without much more to make it stand. I've seen, o'er more years than you or anyone else here—perhaps all of you together, saving only milord dwarf—that many truths and beliefs, especially matters of intrigue, when looked at hard and long by right-minded folk, blow away like mist before the bright sun of late morn."

Stretching himself like a lean and dangerous cat, he raised his mint wine. Holding it up to catch the firelight, he said, "So let us hear no more dark talk of Athalantar. 'Tis unseemly, when one is a guest."

"Nay," the dwarf rapped out, breaking his long silence. He leaned forward, his bristling beard as amber in the firelight as the mane of a lion, and said, gesturing with a leg of spiced lamb as if it were a scepter, "Say on! Not of wizards felling forests, an' all that. Tell me more of this Athalantar. We've heard of strife there, an' I know not enough of the place to know what to believe. Tell me more of it, my Lord Breiyr!"

The Lord of Morlin cleared his throat with an uncertain rumble. He was a direct man, an old warrior who liked simple questions, orders, and views; explaining the whys and wherefores of an entire realm was a task beyond him. He spread his hands. "I—well, eh, my lord herald, ye are a better judge of things there, having seen more of other lands to compare..."

The herald inclined his head. "I shall essay a quick guide,

my lord." He turned to face the dwarf and said, "Athalantar is very much as you've heard—a land of farmers and foresters, with but one hold of size: Hastarl. It is called the Kingdom of the Stag for its last king, Uthgrael Aumar, dead these eight years. He had seven sons, known widely as the Warring Princes. Since their father's death, they've fought for the throne. One had no interest in such strife; another has grown rich in far Calimshan and has shown no desire to return; at least one, and perhaps others, are dead; and the eldest, Belaur, seems now to hold the Stag Throne. Among the Heralds, though, we wonder who really rules."

"Men wonder many things," the elf-lord said smoothly. "One must always take care lest such wonderments be mere castles of fancy."

"Oh?" the dwarf shot back. "Among my folk, we value plain speech. Say on, sir herald, and heed not the clack of overclever tongues."

The elf drew himself up coldly, but the dwarf ignored him, bending his gaze on the young herald, while the Lord of Morlin sat looking uncomfortably from one guest to another.

The bearded man smiled reassuringly at his host, and said, "Our concern over the rule of Athalantar stems from Belaur's manner of achieving victory. He bought, or allied himself with, human wizards from other lands, who are now a strong force in Athalantar. Men call them 'the Magelords.'"

"Which men?" the elven Highlord asked smoothly. He stretched again, and shook out his long silken sleeves. The dwarf and the herald both watched narrowly and saw long elven fingers, half-hidden beneath the silk, moving in intricate gestures.

"The snake casts a spell!" the dwarf snarled, as he hurled his gnawed leg of lamb across the space between them. His powerful shoulders rippled with the throw, and the bone spun swiftly, catching the elf full in the face and rocking him back in his chair.

Servants shrieked, shouted, and fled. The elf shrieked in

fury, grease and sauce shining together on his face, and thrust out one hand. As he pointed at the dwarf, face darkening with rage, a ring on that hand winked with sudden light.

The dwarf roared in fear and anger. His hand streaked to his belt. An instant later, as the Lord of Morlin bellowed in anger and fright of his own and tried to shove himself up from his table with hands no longer as strong as they looked, metal flashed and spun in the firelight. A war axe of the dwarves, flung as hard and as fast as Axelord Arthlach could hurl it, crossed the air even before the dwarf could get out the roar, "For Ammarindar!"

Highlord Falaeve of Siluvanede seemed to be trying to turn and look at the axe, which quivered by his ear, deep-sunk in the high back of his seat. Blood sprayed and splattered in red rain over the white silk, the shimmerweave, and the table around as the elf-lord's head continued to turn, then flopped and dangled loosely, almost severed.

The body slumped and slid a little amid its gushing blood as women screamed and men came running into the hall with drawn swords.

Lord Breiyr stood staring in horror at the slain elf-lord, wondering if this would mean his death and the destruction of his hold. Men had died for less, before now. Then all the color drained out of his face, and he husked, in a horrible echo of his usual bellow, "Look! Look ye, all!"

He pointed at the corpse in the chair with a trembling hand. Amid the dark, glistening blood, there in the dancing firelight, it was moving—flesh sliding wetly, shifting and rearranging into the form of... a man.

" 'Tis Ubriien, Mage Royal of Athalantar!" The shocked, wondering voice belonged to the Knight of the Gate, come from his post in haste with sword drawn.

In the silence, they all heard the herald say softly, "Well, well. It seems I'd best take a sharp look or two around Athalantar, after all."

Something in that voice had changed; the Knight of the Gate and his Lord both looked at the young herald sharply.
Before their eyes, the sleek and bearded visage of the herald Huntinghorn melted away into the bone-white face of a sorceress known up and down the Delimbiyr.
"Darkeyes!"A servant hissed, as men shrank back.
Myrjala gave them a slight smile and turned to face the Lord of Morlin. "I have known pleasure and welcome at your table this night. As I said before, my Lord Breiyr, I am pleased to know you. Peace and good fortune attend this fair hall."
In the heavy, hanging silence, she said to the shocked Knight of the Gate, "Look not for my horse; it knows the way out."
Gaping at her, he made no reply. Myrjala smiled and met the eyes of the dwarf, who gave her a fierce grin. "May
thy axe be ever so sharp and swift, lord—for the sake of Ammarindar and us all." He bowed.
She returned it, then turned and walked away from them
all.
Servants and armsmen alike drew away from her as she strode toward the fire. Two steps short of its flames she wavered, like a wisp of smoke, and was gone.
Lord Breiyr swallowed and looked back at the bloody corpse at the table.
A soft hand touched his shoulder. "Father?"
"Get back, lass," he said roughly. "Ye should not see this."
"I have seen it," was the simple reply, "and I fear 'tis not going to be an easy time, these years before us, living so close to Athalantar."
Not for the first time, Lord Breiyr knew she was right.
I
Introduction
DARK TALONS FORBEAR THEE
Coming of age is almost never smooth and easy. That's one of the reasons I've avoided doing so thus far—and intend to go on delaying as many rites of passage as I can for, yes, as

long as possible.
Yet the storms of youth coming to terms with the world around often make for interesting reading, and have done so, if we can trust the ancient classical writers, down all the generations'history records.
The Realms is no different.
My novel The Temptation of Elminster (and no, it's probably not the temptation you're thinking of, either—unless you were thinking of the power of proffered godhood) ended with Elminster meeting three silver-haired babes, whom he was tasked with rearing to be his fellow Chosen in the centuries to come.
Now, I'm not so much a proud parent of the several-thousand-strong cast of the Realms characters I've so far created as to inflict all the clout (ah, diaper) changing, wailing, and skinned knees of toddlerhood on readers, so let's move ahead a few years, and look at an eruption that began on the sixteenth ofFlamerule,
in the Year of the Broken Crossbow (780 DR).
Ambara Dove is now seventeen, Storm (Ethena Astorma) is enjoying her sixteenth summer, andLaeral (Anamanue Laeral) has reached her fifteenth year.
In getting there, they've made Elminster much older.
Ah, kids these days...
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DARK TALONS FORBEAR THEE
Oh, Great Mistress, hear me."
The whisper is soft, but carries an eerie strength, rolling out across the void in every direction from the spread-eagled, ivory limbs of the floating Priestess of the Night.
"Hear me, I entreat."
As usual, the words move Vrasabra the Anointed to the verge of tears, as she floats alone in the endless darkness. She feels drained, as she always does after the dark talons of the Devourer have manifested out of her. That night they

had torn the flesh of the screaming men with furious energy, crunching even the bones of the doomed sacrifices before fading away.

Leaving faithful Vrasabra alone again, floating in the dark and whispering, "Hear me, my goddess, I beg."

The darkness is suddenly alive with bristling energy and an invisible menace floods into her, jolting every last raven-dark hair on her body into a rigid spearpoint.

Shar has come.

I AM PLEASED, FAITHFUL SERVANT. WORTHY SACRIFICES, ALL. YOU ARE CLEARLY WORTHY FOR A GREATER TASK.

A wise woman would tremble and swallow a curse of despair, but Vrasabra of the Dark Talons is not a wise woman. She is a Priestess of the Night—and, just now, the Priestess of the Night, exalted above all others.

"Command me, my goddess," she hisses, limbs glistening with the sheen of excitement.

OF COURSE. Shar's mind-voice is as cruel as ever. MY MOST HATED RIVAL HAS THREE SHE-SERVANTS WHO HAVE LIVED FAR TOO LONG ALREADY. THE LOSS OF THESE THREE DAUGHTERS WILL HURT HER VERY MUCH. YOUR TALONS WILL CAUSE THAT LOSS.

"Oh, yes, goddess!"

YES, VRASABRA. The echo is mocking.

GO SPEEDILY AND DEVOUR FOR ME THE ONES CALLED AMBARA DOVE, ETHENA ASTORMA, AND ANAMANUE LAERAL. THREE HUMAN MAIDS WITH LONG SILVER HAIR AND ALLTHE RUDE DEFIANCE OF THE MYSTRA THEY SERVE. THEY ARE IN THE CARE OF THE ONE CALLED ELMINSTER.

Vrasabra's hiss of hatred is strong, but Shar seems almost to chuckle.

SLAY THAT ONE NOT. I HAVE OTHER PLANS FOR HIM.

"Yes, goddess," the floating priestess promises, not troubling to hide the disappointment in her voice.

The darkness seems to surge through her, and she gasps in sudden fear, pain, and ecstasy.

Rapture that overwhelms her and rewards her for everything, now and forevermore...

When Shar's touch leaves her, there is no more darkness, and Vrasabra is sprawled facedown on the cold stones of her temple in the moonlight.

She arises, simmering with power, and it is the turn of the ring of kneeling underpriestesses to gasp.

The bare skin of the Priestess of the Night is as ivory-hued and flawless as ever, but her eyes are now two dark wells, lacking pupils and whites entirely.

Her smile, however, is as cruel as ever.

The ruins were too old to have a name. Not that anything more than a short and simple name would have suited them, for they were not much more than a few butter-smooth, cracked stone slabs around the circular base of a long-vanished pillar, in the ferny depths of a forest glade.

The girls called them just The Place, and loved to play there—mainly because Uncle El had forbidden it, but also for the reason behind his prohibition: Spells cast there were "twisted wild," and made one's skin glow like faint moonlight, one's feet leave the ground in a gentle floating, and all cold dwindle away—even in the depths of winter. Snow never fell on the stones of The Place, even when it was piled neck-deep all around.

Dove was idling there now, in the moonlit heart of a warm summer night, dancing lazily in midair with all the indolent confidence of her seventeen summers. She was wasting the few feeble spells El had taught her and watching them ripple forth from her fingers as blossoming flowers, eels, and little jets of scorching flame. The Art smelled like rain-tang, stinging her nostrils, and her skin prickled with its surges.

"Unleashing magic in The Place was... dangerous," their tall and bearded guardian had said, frowning severely.

Dove had shown him the length of her tongue then, and she aimed it at his unseen, distant presence now.

As if in reply to her rudeness, a familiar figure slipped gently

out of the trees to join her. It was both more slender and shapely than Elminster Aumar, and preferred to be known by the name of "Storm."
Her sister's long unbound silver hair flowed behind her like a cascade of moonfall as she came to the edge of the
stones, grinned at Dove, and announced cheerfully, "Andur Marlestur is at the cottage."
"Looking for me? At this time of night? Has Uncle turned him into several sorts of frog at once yet?"
"No, because he's doing nothing more amorous than earnestly asking your opinion of what flowers his mother would like best for her year-day gift. He forgot, of course, and—"
" 'Tis on the morrow, yes. And just what am I earnestly replying, given that I'm nowhere to be found? Or is Elminster scouring the forest, and you've kindly come running to fetch me before he does?"
"Uncle El is calmly smoking his pipe and chuckling at Lord Marlestur's tongue-tangles. And you're teasing him mercilessly—which is making poor Andur even more stumble-spoken than usual, and delighting Uncle to the point of choking on his smoke."
"I'm what?"
"Teasing him mercilessly, I believe I said," Storm replied with impish calm.
Dove's magic might have been weaker than that of her two younger sisters, but there was nothing wrong with her wits. Her eyes scarcely had time to narrow before she spat, "Laeral! She's wearing my shape again, the little witch!"
She rolled over in midair so suddenly that the magic of The Place dropped her an armlength closer to its old stones, and added crossly, "I wish she'd stop that!"
"Ah," Storm replied, smiling up at the high-riding moon, "like Uncle El wishes you wouldn't come here?"
"Uncle El can thrust his pipe where he'll feel its heat—and stuff the end of his beard in after it!" Dove snarled savagely,

hurling herself out of the magic of The Place to strike the dead leaves and moss underfoot at full and angry barefoot stride. "I have plans for Andur Marlestur!"

Storm chuckled and said merrily to her older sister's dwindling back, "Now fancy that. I daresay he has plans for you, too."

"Little bitch!" Dove snarled, by way of greeting. Her eyes leaked silver sparks that eddied through her writhing hair, a sure sign of rage. At least, the Dove crashing through the trees looked that furious.

The Dove who wore nothing but torn and much-patched forester's breeches and the ardently cradling young arms of Lord Andur Marlestur looked surprised—and a trifle alarmed.

A moment earlier, she'd been lifting her lips to those of the local lordling, the smooth swell of her front brushing velvet-soft against him, but now—

Now she was suddenly hoping Uncle El would reappear.

For his part, Andur was looking down at her in horror and shame, wondering just who he was holding, if 'twasn't his Dove.

The voice of his beloved—the furious Dove who'd just arrived—rose in a swift, angry chant somewhere behind his shoulder, and Andur thrust the shapely softness in his arms away in fear and scrambled for the trees, fleeing blindly into the night with an unhappy cry.

Bright blue lightning lanced the night behind him, and Andur flung himself facedown into brambles with a shriek of terror.

"You bitch! You meddling little bitch!" Dove snarled, as her bolt struck the warding Uncle El had woven around Laeral and splashed harmlessly away, its only effect being to snatch away her youngest sister's spell-spun disguise and reveal Laeral's true looks to all moonlit Faerun around them.

Laeral shrugged, spread her hands, and pouted, "I was merely having a little fun—and doing you the service, I might add, of showing you just what Lord High and Mighty

Marlestur is really after!"
Dove pounced, hands raised to rake and claw, but Laeral laughed and was—elsewhere. Standing halfway across the cottage glade in a whirl of spell-sparks, to be precise.
Her eldest sister glowered at her and snapped, "I know quite well what Andur is after, Laer—and it's not cuddling with a fifteen-year-old who's mastered only one thing in her short, twisted life thus far: playing cruel pranks!"
Seething, she whirled and plunged into the forest where Andur Marlestur had fled, bent branches dancing in her wake.
After a moment, Laeral shrugged and strolled over to retrieve the jerkin Andur had so fumblingly undone and drawn aside, a few breaths ago. Holding it up before her, she indulged in a single, brief giggle.
"That was cruel, Laer," Storm said, from behind her.
Laeral turned around with a shrug that was almost angry. "So? Dove spends all her time defying Uncle El, being all sorts of cruel to him—and he's everything to us! Our cook, our washerwoman, our seamstress, our woodcutter..."
Storm sighed. "Yes, but... well, I don't like being told not to do things, either. And Uncle El tells us not to do so many things."
Laeral shook her head in disgust. "And like Dove, you fall into his trap of defiantly rushing to do those forbidden things, just as he intended you to. For all your superior we're-so-grown-up airs, the two of you are pretty stump-headed most of the time."
Storm and Laeral were both angry now, standing almost nose-to-nose in the moonlight, their silver tresses stirring about their shoulders like annoyed snakes. Wherefore neither of them noticed the man they called their uncle, grinning to himself behind the nearest clump of thornbushes.
They were handfuls, these three—and the gods had, after all, only given him two hands. But sometimes they also

provided delightful entertainment. Though poor young Andur probably didn't think so, just now...

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The dark woods were full of thorns and jabbing branches, and it wasn't long before a panting, exhausted Andur Marlestur, Lord of Tharnwood, was utterly lost.

Lost and in much pain, sliced where he hadn't been jabbed, bruised from precipitous falls down unseen banks onto unexpected stones, Andur groaned and gulped air and staggered frantically on. Something was crashing through the trees far behind him, and that brought cold fear up into his throat, almost strangling him. He had to get out of the forest, had to find the familiar tower of Tharnw—

There was moonlight ahead of him, and an open area. Thankfully he thrust his way forward through crackling branches, and almost fell onto—

The smooth stones of some old, vanished ruin. A tall woman with night-dark hair and darker eyes stood at their heart, bare and beautiful, awaiting him with a cold and hungry smile.

"There you are, Lord Marlestur," she said, reaching out a welcoming hand.

Andur stared at her in disbelief, eyes caught by her smile and her—her... She stood proudly, smooth ivory skin glowing in the moonlight, and he stared.

"Yes," she whispered softly, turning her head aside almost demurely. "What I can give is yours ..."

Andur's clumsy feet stumbled then and brought him staggering out onto the stones—and in a trice an arm was around him, soft flesh was pressed against him—and an icy fang was slicing through his throat.

The priestess held him firmly against herself as he gouted blood—Shar Above, so muck blood!—trembled, spasmed, and died.

Then Vrasabra the Anointed allowed the Devourer within her to manifest just enough to let many mouths swim up from

beneath her flesh and suck. Their long tongues licked away all traces of Andur Marlestur's gore before she let his body slump to the stones where magic went wild, and betook herself and her newly-cleaned dagger away.

Keeping the Devourer from stretching forth jaws to rend and bite down required all her strength, and she gasped and staggered as badly as Andur had done as she got herself back into the trees. But a Priestess of the Night is trained to be strong—and Vrasabra was a very good Priestess of the Night.

Andur Marlestur's body must be intact enough to be recognized by the lass who daily dallied with him, for the lure to work.

And by all the Holy Darkness of Shar herself, the lure would work.

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"Andur? Andur!"

There was nothing wrong with Dove's night-sight, and she'd seen death before. Andur Marlestur was still warm, his wide eyes staring forever up at the moon in astonishment, his mouth slack and... bloodless. But how, in so few breaths, could—

Then, kneeling with the lad she might have loved in her arms, Ambara Dove saw the ragged slash across his throat, heard faint rustlings in the trees all around her... and knew the who, if not the how.

Tears made the moonlight so many shimmering stars, but through them she could see the men with knives—a dozen of them, and more. Hard of face and eye and dark-clad, they drew swiftly apart to surround her, forming a ring around the stones of The Place.

In a flare of heartfelt fury Dove lashed them with fire—or tried to. Her magic went wild, of course, becoming sparks that boiled up into bell-clear tones, a mocking music that drifted harmlessly into the trees and left the men in dark leathers grinning at her.

They were still spreading out, each man striding farther from the next, and laughing at her snarls of rage. Dove tried another spell, which failed even more feebly than her first.
In its wake, she could think of nothing else to do but watch as the bladesmen completed their ring. Then, at a sharply snapped order—just where it came from, she couldn't catch—they all took a step closer to her.
Where they stopped, gazing on her with smiles that held no shred of mercy.
Dove swallowed, fought down the urge to lash out with another spell that would be twisted into futility, and forced herself to sink down in her mind . .. down into the warm, humming, eternally-waiting glow of the Weave. Where she flung a silent cry at the unseen cottage: Uncle El! Storm! Uncle El! Aid—aid, or I die! She sent the gleaming of knives she was gazing at with that plea, wrapped around its ringing urgency, to show the peril she faced.
And waited, quivering in fear and grief, Andur's dead face so close beneath her, hoping the men with the knives would go on waiting for whatever they were waiting for.
That sharp order came again, and the ring tightened another step, booted feet stepping in unison up onto the stones she knelt on.
And there they stopped again.
Something stirred, deep in Dove's mind, almost choking her, and she couldn't hide her alarm. This turmoil wasn't of her doing, wasn't...
Then something burst through the trees, trailing a whirlwind of shredded leaves, flying hard and fast right at her.
It darted over the heads of the ring of bladesmen, caught the moonlight for the briefest of instants as a falcon—then struggled in the air, clawed by the silent wild magic of The Place, to tumble helplessly down to the stones before her: a panting, breathless, barefoot Storm.
As if that had been what the men with the knives had been waiting for, they sprang forward in an eager wave of dark

leather, gleaming grins, and reaching knives,
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Laeral arched and clawed at the moonlit air, losing her pout in a wild, large-eyed gasp as Elminster's mind-voice crashed into her head.
GET TO THE PLACE, TO FIGHT FOR DOVE'S LIFE— NOW. MANY MEN WITH KNIVES. LASH THEM WITH SPELLS FROM WELL OUTSIDE THE WILD MAGIC.
The youngest of the three sisters in Elminster's care reeled, clutching the red pain spilling through her head. Uncle's farspeaking had not been gentle.
Yet she had pride and strength enough to straighten upright into an insolent pose, sigh, roll her eyes, and ask, "So the High-and-Mighty Mistress Dove the Willful has got
herself encoiled in something beyond her at last, has she? You've let her stew long enough already to learn something, I trust?"
YES. AND NO. COME!
Elminster's command was a mind-shout that sent Laeral to her knees. She bit her lip and shuddered helplessly for a breath or two, and then pouted, straightened, and told the moon overhead, "Unlike my sister Dove, I'm not going to disobey just for the delight of doing so. That's so childish."
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Dove rolled poor Andur under the rushing feet of the men in front of her as she spun around and launched herself in the other direction. Knives were stabbing in at her—she was going to die—she was—
The roiling in her head was now a dark, rising thunder in her body, shaking her in its inexorable approaching flood.
She screamed, or thought she did, as something burst out of her, blinding her momentarily. Storm groaned in pain somewhere behind her, then—
The bladesmen right in front of Dove toppled as if their legs had been cut from under them, and a dark, bearded form that was—yes—Uncle Elminster rose up out of their

bouncing limbs to busily thrust a dagger into the neck of the bladesman to his left.
Dove's frantic dive slammed her straight into the thrashing bodies of the fallen bladesmen. They were hard, heavy, and reeking, and she slid onward in what could only be blood, coming to an uneasy stop surrounded by the stink of death and the dark hulks of dead men.
Someone spewed out blood and an agonized groan back where Uncle El was plying his knife, then Dove heard two men grunt in pain, almost in unison, as if sharp steel had been driven deep into them both.
She scrambled up, looking wildly around for a knife, and saw Elminster sagging to the stones, clutching at his side— and nearly knocking foreheads with a bladesman doing the same thing. They'd stabbed each other!
Already more bladesmen were hastening over to stab at Uncle El...
A spell washed over them all, stabbing arcs of lightning that became floods of harmless water in a struggling instant. Someone spat out a startled curse that rose into a shriek of pain as Storm flung herself shoulder-down on the corpse-strewn stones, her palms still flickering in the aftermath of her useless spell, and brought her legs up into a bladesman's crotch with all the force she could muster.
One of the men attacking Uncle El turned his head to see what Storm was doing, and that gave Dove time enough to see and snatch at a fallen knife. Another bladesman leaned forward to slash down viciously at her and sliced open her shoulder with fiery ease.
The slashed remnants of Dove's light gown fell away to her waist as she rolled desperately away. She kept rolling, clawing open the catches of her girdle and coming up again to lash a bladesman's dagger aside with it, then flail him across the face with the corset-like leather.
He slashed back at her blindly and she caught his knife-hand and flung herself to the stones again, twisting hard.

He screamed as bones broke and let go of his steel fang.
Dove snatched it away and rolled, losing the rest of her gown in twisted confusion around her neck. It took but a moment to pluck it off and swing it as a flail of sorts into another bladesman's face, then serve his throat as Andur's had been.
Hot blood sprayed her bare flesh, and Dove hissed in disgust, whirling away again to face the man she'd disarmed. He stared at her bared flesh for a moment as the moonlight caught her curves, and she flung herself at his ankles.
As he cursed, toppled, and came down hard, she stabbed up—harder.
More blood fountained, but thankfully he fell over and past her, spraying someone else.
The night flared into eerie blue-white fire behind Dove, and several men cursed in alarm.
She turned her head in time to see Elminster staggering to his feet, face twisted in pain, and what should have been blood leaking from between his fingers as blue-white, dripping tongues of flame. The hilt of a dagger that no longer had a blade fell away from him, to clang and clatter on the stones.
Then real lightning split the night, laced with Laeral's triumphant laughter. Outlined against it Dove saw bladesmen who'd staggered off the stones convulse, wave their limbs spasmodically, and fall.
The lightnings turned to streams of radishes, bouncing and rolling, wherever they reached into The Place—but where they struck Elminster's flaming blood, the spew of radishes turned to lightning again, scorching at least one bladesman until his sizzling eyes sprouted plumes of smoke and he fell, gasping out more smoke.
Dove tripped over someone, saw someone else looming up over a desperately-rolling Storm, and went for him, lashing him with her gown and her girdle. The man sidestepped,

slashing at both garments, and Dove flung herself down, scissoring her legs around his.
He started to fall, waving his arms wildly to try to stay upright, and she stabbed at him with her dagger. He twisted away with a triumphant howl, only to overbalance and fall backward onto the stolen dagger a grimly-smiling Storm was holding ready. It burst up through the man's throat with a dark bubbling, and he barely had time to stare disbelievingly up at the moon before his wide eyes froze and his frantically-cursing mouth fell slack.
Storm groaned under him, pinned and breathless, and Dove reached to try to free her.
"Begone, useless fools," came a sharp command, and this time Dove heard enough of the sharp voice to know that it was female. It came from a tall woman with night-dark hair and darker eyes who was walking barefoot out of the trees, a loose cloak eddying around her ivory limbs and a dark mask failing to conceal her smile.
Two gliding steps brought the woman to the edge of the stones as bladesmen fled into the woods like hurrying shadows. The cloak was flung off and the mask followed, and from the ivory-hued body thus revealed inky darkness flooded, devouring moonlight as it came.
Trees, the moon, and even the corpse-strewn stones of The Place vanished before that swift-spreading gloom, but in the resulting void Dove found she could still see some things.
Or rather, some people. Uncle El lay curled over in pain, his skin glowing a pale white and that bright blue-white fire leaking from him in ribbons and pooling around him.
Storm's skin was white, too, and so was Dove's own—and blue-white flames pulsed in slices and gashes on both of them.
A similar moon-white glow shone brightly from the shapely woman confronting them, but her skin was moving, thrusting outward here and there as if trapped fists were reaching out from beneath it, and darkening where it did so.

Darkening and erupting into long, cruel black claws, and narrow-snouted, many-toothed jaws.
"Behold," the woman purred, "the Dark Talons of the Devourer."
She glided forward, shapely no longer, a small forest of eel-like necks ending in clamshell-like jaws, wriggling tal-oned tentacles, and that soft cruel smile.
"In the sacred name of Shar I feed," she announced calmly, kneeling over the dead bladesman and the struggling, still-pinned Storm beneath him. "I, Vrasabra the Anointed, Priestess of the Night."
There was a brief flash of magic from somewhere behind the priestess, but it howled into strange music, followed by Laeral's disgusted curse.
Vrasabra smiled. "Handy, this place of wild magic. And fitting that creatures of Mystra should perish because of her carelessness." Talons reached forward almost gently to pluck aside the dead bladesman and reach for—
Elminster gasped out a desperate spell and the night boiled. Blood burst from him in all directions in a blue-white mist. The very stones of The Place shook, then the tall, slender wizard was suddenly hanging in midair, with great white wings sprouting from him.
Three, four—Dove watched in horror as a spine sprouted from Uncle El's disbelieving face and grew feathers, white pinions racing along its length with uncanny speed as he moaned, sobbed, and flung himself forward in a chaos of mismatched wingbeats, rolling like a tumbleweed.
Vrasabra the Anointed hissed and shrank back, talons and jaws gathering in front of her in a wall of menace.
Elminster did nothing to her, instead snatching up Storm in his arms as he hissed in pain, leaking blue-white fiery blood all over her, and flung himself forward into the night.
"Get o#the stones!" he gasped at Dove, as he hit the ground hard and rolled—or tried to. A crumpling chaos of wings spilled Storm onto the ground in a comical collapse that

made the priestess of Shar crow with mirth—and pounce.
Then the night lit up with a white flood that seared eyeballs and left everyone blinking dazedly at Laeral, who stood wearing nothing but torn and much-patched forester's breeches—and a coldly sneering smile.
"A step too far, Sharran," she said triumphantly, her eyes igniting like two silver flames. "Now kiss the Weave."
The very air tore audibly as magefire slashed talons and claws alike, hurling a shrieking Vrasabra of Shar headlong across The Place. Stone glowed and heaved where the roiling fires touched them, but released the priestess, who crashed into saplings on the far side of the ruins, trailing smoke.
Dove turned, caught up a fallen knife, and ran toward the woman—but behind her Laeral's cry of glee rose into an ear-stabbing scream that went on, and on, and...
Brightness crashed through and flooded all, carrying Dove far, far away.
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Swimming through glimmering waves of tears, the moon hung silent and serene, telling Dove wordlessly that not much time had passed.
She sat up—or tried to, but somehow found herself on her face.
She tried again, but the night whirled around Dove then ebbed away, leaving her on her back again.
Rolling over with slow caution, she saw that the glade was awash in a soft blue-white glow. The very air was glowing.
That glow seemed to be rooted in the sprawled body of Laeral, who lay senseless on her back, staring at nothing.
Between Laeral and the wincing, staggering priestess of Shar—whose bare body trailed dozens of limp, lifeless jaws and talons, though a handful still writhed and snapped hungrily—lay a scorched area that no longer held any ancient stones.
The Place was gone.

Its slabs and the base of its pillar had vanished, swept away into some otherness that seemed to have claimed half of Uncle El's wings—which were sheared off in a straight line as if sliced by a sword. That left only their roots sprouting from ... the sprawled, motionless body of the patient man who'd reared Dove and her sisters.

A scorched and dazed Storm was wandering aimlessly among the trees and trampled ferns beyond Elminster, where the huddled thing that had once been Andur Marlestur also lay. A few daggers and severed arms and hands were also scattered about, but most of the dead bladesmen had vanished with the stones they'd been sprawled on.

"Ohhh," the Sharran gasped, clawing her way up a tree until she was more or less upright, "that was a spell. No more wild magic here. Gone, quite gone." She tried a smile, and found that—between winces—it managed to linger.

"Leaving none of you strong enough to resist the Devourer."

Vrasabra the Anointed left the tree behind and came unsteadily through the glow toward Storm, almost falling once.

She'd nearly reached her mumbling, staggering prey when the body of Andur Marlestur stirred under her feet, tripping her into a headlong fall.

The Sharran came up snarling, turning to meet her new foe—and by then the dead lordling was on his feet, his head lolling lifelessly and his eyes fixed on nothing.

"No undeath comes so quickly!" the priestess snarled in disbelief, stepping back to hiss the words of a spell that would impose her will on the walking corpse.

The remains of the Lord of Tharnwood folded its arms politely and waited for her to finish—but the moment she'd done

so, the bloodless body staggered forward to embrace her.

"Kiss of the goddess!" Vrasabra spat in revulsion, thrusting the shambling thing away from her.

Dove found fresh grief welling up in her as she saw her Andur stagger doggedly forward, trying to aid her one last time.
He couldn't be alive, simply 'twasn't possible! She shook her head through new tears, found one dagger, then another, and launched herself at the Sharran.
Who saw her and spun around with a snarl, talons lashing out—
Which was when Storm, also staggering doggedly forward, as if someone was shoving her along and holding her up at the same time, walked straight into the priestess from one side—and poor dead Andur slammed into her from another.
Crushed between them, Vrasabra fell the only way she could, toppling forward into Dove's waiting daggers with a helpless cry.
Talons raked and claws bit in a brief frenzy that left Dove sobbing in pain, but Andur thrust himself between her and the snarling priestess, standing like a shield as agonies fell away from Dove to savage him instead.
Biting her lip against still-sickening pain, Dove reached around her dead beloved and drove the daggers hard into what she could no longer see, again and again.
After a time, the priestess gave a soft gasp, and Dove's reaching fangs found only air.
She dropped them, shaking, and tried to collapse, but Andur's arms found her and held her up, strong and tender ... and cold.
Tears blinded her, sweeping her away like a waterfall. Cold, so cold...
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The brightness on her face was warm and golden. Sunlight—afternoon sunlight Wearily Dove opened her eyes, tensing against the pain.
There was none.
How could that be? She was lying on her back, naked but covered with her own quilt. Outside?

Someone snorted softly beside her—a snort of awakening that sounded somewhat familiar.
Dove turned her head. A sleepy-eyed Storm was stretching like a cat. Laeral lay asleep beyond her, in the same pool of sunlight. They were all on the mossy bank outside the cottage, lying under their bed-quilts—and a long, familiar shadow lay across the bottom of Storm's quilt.
Its source was sitting on his favorite stump, watching them, a rather sad smile on his face.
"Andur?" Dove asked Uncle Elminster quietly.
"Buried with honor. His body served me well, for the brief time I needed it."
She closed her eyes, drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and nodded.
Elminster gave her silence until she was ready to ask something else.
"The priestess of Shar?"
"Dead, and taken far from here. The Mother of Mysteries was less than pleased."
"What happened to The Place?" Storm asked softly.
"Swept away by Laeral's spell—both the wild magic and all trace of the stones." Uncle El's voice held just a trace of what might have been admiration.
Dove sighed and turned back the quilt to look down at herself. As she'd expected, there was no trace of the gory wounds that should have been there. "You healed us, and yourself, too. The Weave?"
"The Weave," Elminster confirmed calmly.
"Is... is this the way it's always going to be?" Storm asked. "With the right magic, you can make everything better?"
Uncle El gave her a long, level look. "Most cuts and the like I can banish, scars and all." He reached up and tapped his forehead. "Scars up here are much harder things to make go away. So don't go looking for more trouble than ye want to embrace."
Dove saw Laeral's eyelids flicker, and knew she'd come

awake and lay listening.
"So my Andur is gone," she said, managing to say the words without a quaver, "and we all got a scare, and felt much pain, besides. And you let us fight with each other and get into scrapes like this and do nothing to stop us, when you could shout in our heads and even ride our minds and force us to walk and act and speak as you will."
She sat up, looked at both of her sisters then back at Elminster, and added, "We've been right proper little bitches to you, time and again—yet you let us. Why? Does Mystra command you thus?"
"Nay," the wizard replied. "Just as I try not to command ye three."
"Even when we stride right into trouble?"
"Aye. Life is learning, lass—or 'tis no life at all, but mere existence. And the lessons learned best are those ye learn on thy own, and learn hardest."
"But you were almost slain," Laeral said suddenly, sitting up to fix him with bright eyes. "I felt it, when..."
"When Mystra thrust the full power of the Weave into ye. I was nearly done, aye."
"But why? Did you do something... foolish?"
"Several things. Ye see, little one, I've learned all too few lessons yet."
"And Mystra trusts you to raise and train us?"
"I believe ye three enjoy her full confidence."
"What?"
"That's hardly a ladylike query, now, is it? Choose words again."
Laeral pursed her lips, wrinkled her nose, then said disgustedly, "Pray pardon, good Uncle, but did my ears betray me? I almost believe I heard ye—uh, you say we three sisters enjoy the full confidence of the goddess."
"Aye, ye did."
"And what, precisely, is she confident we can do?" Elminster smiled wryly. "Why, teach me necessary lessons, of course."

Introduction

THE WHISPERING CROWN

The Realms is awash in magic, and one of the things magic gives a writer of fantasy is power. Its often literal "lightning bolts crackling in thy palms" can afford a narrative swift justice, fire-from-the-sky clobbering, and whiplash revenge—in short, all the bangs and blasts of race-and-chase movies or even full-fledged military battles.

Done right, magic also has awe and mystery that mere munitions lack . . . and it can lurk anywhere, from forgotten runes to hidden traps to the fingertips of old crones or wide-eyed children. In other words, magic (and the fear of what it can do) can balance against "the big sweaty brute with the sword."

Yet magic always has a price, and those who guide it (the Chosen of Mystra, including the notorious Elminster), hand out lessons along with all the spell-glows.

All too often, their warnings and grave advice are seen as threats, and as the infamous Volo said once, "If I must hear threats, archmages at least have the vocabulary to make them interesting. I'd love to hear Elminster, The Simbul, and Khelben all threaten each
other. Er, from a safe distance away. Half a continent or so should be about right, don't you think?"

A little more than a century after our last tale, let's hear some of those threats as we look in on another young lass who can wield magic struggling to come of age—in one of the many small holds and realms that then flourished in what is now northern Amn. It's nigh sunset on Kythorn 30, in the Year of the Queen's Tears (902 DR), and Lady Aerindel has a pressing problem...

THE WHISPERING CROWN

The young Lady of Dusklake stood alone in her feast hall in the last golden gleam of the setting sun, and waited to die.

Dusklake and Grand Thentor had been at war for only a day, but the battle between Aerindel and Rammast, Lord of

Grand Thentor, had begun when they were both children. He had wanted her to be his toy, slave, and plaything for more than a dozen years.
And Rammast was not a man accustomed to waiting long for anything.
He would come for her, and soon. Aerindel wondered if she'd be strong enough to hold on to the three things she valued most: her freedom, her land... and her life.
Knowing what was coming, she'd sent the servants away—but she also knew that eyes were watching
her anxiously from behind parted tapestries and doors that somehow hadn't quite closed, all around the hall. The eyes of those who feared she might take her own life.
The news of her brother's death lay like a heavy cloak over the household—but it rested most heavily on the Lady Aerindel. Somehow she could not quite believe she'd never hear his bright laughter echoing in the high hall again, or feel his strong arms lift her by her slim waist and whirl her high into the air.
But the news had been blunt and clear enough. Dabras was dead by dragonfire, the grim old warriors had said, proffering his half-melted swordhilt and their own scorched wounds as proof. And that made her ruler of Dusklake.
A small realm, Dusklake, but long ago widely known— and feared—for the man then its master: the mage Thabras Stormstaff. Thabras, Aerindel's faintly-smiling, sad-eyed father. The mightiest of a long line of famous heads of House Summertyn, from the grandfather Aerindel had never known, the warrior Orbrar the Old, to Asklas and Ornthorn and others in the early days known only in legends. A small but proud hold, it was the oldest of all the Esmeltaran, the holds nestled in the rolling woodlands between Lake Esmel and the Cloud Peaks. Hers, now.
If she could hold it. Aerindel looked grimly out through a window that was seven times her height at the lake the land was named for. Its waters were dark and placid, at the end of

a bright, cool summer day. The Green Fields to the north were still a sheet of golden light, but westward the purple peaks of the Ridge rose like a dark wall, bringing an early nightfall down on her hall.

A night that would surely bring Rammast. Dusklake was small but verdant, perhaps the fairest of all the Esmeltaran. Rammast wanted it even more than he wanted her.

Aerindel looked at the fire-scarred blob that was all she had left of dear Dabras, and drew in a deep, unhappy breath. She would cry no more, whatever the hours ahead brought. She was a Summertyn, even if her slim arms were too feeble to swing a warrior's sword.

Her spells might serve her where his sword had failed him, though she hoped never to be foolish and battle-hungry enough to go off to the distant Dales, as he had, hunting dragons. It was the year 902 there, she thought dully, recalling the words of a far-traveled trader... but there, as here, it was The Year of the Queen's Tears.

How fitting. She had wept for hours, two nights ago, clinging to the fire-scarred warriors as if their unhappy memories and awkward soothings could somehow bring Dabras back to life. Sometime the next day—yesterday—she'd been awakened in her own bed by a frightened chamberlass, bringing in an oh-so-polite missive from Rammast.

He grieved for her loss, the flowery-scrolled words read, and hoped to be of help in her time of need. With the world growing ever darker and more dangerous, there was no one in Faerun who could stand alone in safety, without friends.

Dusklake stood in need of strong swords to defend it against brigands and the ores of the mountains, Rammast's words went on—and Grand Thentor had need of her magic, just as his heart had need of her hand. A wise woman would gladly see that the union of their two lands would set them all on the road to a brighter future; but if she lacked that wisdom or inclination, his duty was clear. His people needed the protection of a sorceress, and he must win her by formal

duel if not by her willing submission. At sundown he would come for her answer.

It had taken all of Aerindel's brittle self-control to keep from crumpling and shredding the parchment in fearful fury. She had grown less and less fond of darkly handsome, cruel Rammast as the years had passed.

In the pale, slim, so often silent days of her youth, he'd been the first man to look upon her with hunger in his eyes. Later, he had been the first to see that though she'd inherited the rings, staff, and spellbooks of the mighty Thabras, her magic was no more than a feeble, faltering echo of his... and that Dusklake, secure for so long behind Thabras's might, had far fewer hardened warriors to ride to its defense than other neighboring holds could muster.

Once, at a wedding in Hulduth Hold they'd both attended, he'd been particularly forceful in his attentions during a private walk in the gardens. Freeing herself from his grasp, Aerindel had made her own feelings about him coldly and crisply plain. Unperturbed, Rammast had given her the special swift, sly grin he used when gloating, and told her softly that one day Dusklake would be his, and her with it—as his slave, willing and eager to serve him once his magic controlled her wits.

Now, the final taunting words of his missive had said that his own magic remained regrettably inadequate to the task of defending Grand Thentor against its foes, but that he had learned some measure of . . . control. He hoped she'd remember, and greet his suit fondly.

Aerindel hadn't heard anything of Rammast's dabblings in magic since he'd inherited Grand Thentor—beyond a few rumors of summoned beasts running amok, and hired hedge-wizard tutors disappearing mysteriously. His reminder of wanting her as a mind-controlled slave, however, was clear enough. And that confidence meant that he'd measured her magic, and knew himself to be clearly the more powerful.

Bringing her thoughts back to the present, Aerindel licked lips that seemed to have gone dry and glanced again at the banner-pole, one of a pair flanking the tall window, that was really her father's staff. No doubt she'd be needing it soon.

It and some greater magical aid or ally she knew not where to find, let alone to plead with. What could she give in payment? Herself and her land were all she had, and the very things Rammast sought. She could see no way to keep from losing one—or both—before dawn.

Night was coming down swiftly as the last light faded from the still waters of the lake.

Then she saw him: a lone, dark figure walking steadily across the lake toward her. Walking upon the waters as if they were a vast courtyard. A spell spent to show her how powerful he was. Powerful enough that he could afford to waste magic before a duel.

Aerindel turned slowly, her dark gown rustling about her hips, and wondered idly why she'd dressed in her best finery to meet her most hated enemy. Looking all around the hall, she raised her voice and said calmly to the unseen watchers, "Withdraw, all of you. Danger comes swiftly."

She turned back to the window in time to see Rammast Tarangar smile broadly in sardonic greeting, incline his head to her, and raise one hand.

The bright bolt that burst from it shattered the tall window from top to bottom, sending singing shards of glass flying down the chamber like scattered fragments of a rainbow.

The Lady of Dusklake did not flinch." 'Tis a strange man," Aerindel observed, her voice calmer than it might have been, "whose wooing takes the form of battle."

Rammast stepped through the empty window frame into the room, the tiny lightnings of a warding spell flickering briefly about his shoulders. When no attack came, he glanced briefly around the room, seeking warriors with ready weapons. Finding none, he smiled at her more broadly and advanced across the tiles at an insolent stroll.

"You are as beautiful as ever, my lady," he said to her through his smile, "and your tongue remains as cold and cruel as I recall. Yet tongues can be tamed, Aerindel."
"Ah, but can ambition also be tamed, Lord Rammast? I am not 'your lady'; not now, not ever. Yet I see no need not to be the ally of Grand Thentor. Our two realms can be friendly without us being wed, or my taking up the position you suggested."
Rammast's eyes burned into hers. "Ah, but I believe you'll enjoy being my slave. You'll find me the most gentle and thoughtful of men—until I have two strong sons to be my heirs." He shrugged. "By then, of course, you may have grown weary of being my consort, or Lady of Dusklake, or even—who knows?—of life."
They both heard an angry gasp from behind a tapestry then, as one of the warriors who'd refused to leave his lady unguarded wrestled with his temper. Rammast casually raised a hand and sent lightnings crackling along that side of the room—and in two places, down the long sweep of tapestries, forms stiffened, slid down the far side of the heavy cloth, and lay still.
The Lord of Grand Thentor raised an eyebrow. "Am I too late, Lady? Have you consorts already?" n
Aerindel bit her lip, trembling in grief and rage until she could master her words. He waited, smiling mockingly, until she opened her mouth deliberately and said, "In Dusklake we have laws against slaying, Lord Rammast, and you now stand in violation of those laws. Are you willing to submit to my justice, or is it to be war between us?"
Rammast raised his other eyebrow. "Are you threatening me?"
With the same casual ease as last time, he cast lightning along the other side of the hall, scarring hangings and statues alike. "Or do you just ache to see me on my knees?"
"It's a pose you've no doubt pictured me in often enough," Aerindel replied grimly, raising her own hands to weave a

spell.
Rammast smiled broadly and beckoned her magic toward him with a formal bow. "I wondered how long you'd tremble and haw before loosing some of that vast and mighty magic all of us in the Esmeltaran talk about! Hurl away, bright lady!" He crossed his arms and stood waiting.
Roaring pinwheels of green flame were his reply, snarling out of the empty air around her slim fingers to fly at him, spinning and expanding.
Rammast stood unmoving as they reached him and burst—and for the briefest of moments Aerindel thought she could see their dying flashes through him. Then he yawned and stepped forward again.
"Your fame is not undeserved," he said lightly, clear and dismissive boredom in his tone. "Impressive. Very impressive." He opened his hand.
Something small fluttered from it: a serpent with wings. It circled his head once as Aerindel quickly cast another spell, then flew toward her.
Two crackling arcs of the stream of lightnings that she sent at Rammast curled aside to meet the flying thing, but expired in brief haloes as they encountered some sort of shield around it.
The Lord of Grand Thentor stood immobile, still smiling,
as her lightnings lashed him. Aerindel saw the snake swooping at her and ducked away, but it followed, eyes bright and fangs agape. It was glistening, wet with slime, and mottled like an uncooked sausage.
She hissed a quick magical shield as she retreated from it—but the very air shattered in shrieks and flashing radiances as the flying monster darted right through her magic.
Aerindel screamed and covered her face as it roared down at her. Her cry was answered by the crack of a crossbow, fired from a high balcony.
The Lady of Dusklake rolled and hit out at the serpent. Above her, she saw a crossbow bolt halt in midair, catch fire

from end to end with blue flame that did not consume it, and spin around to race back the way it had come.
There was a despairing shout an instant before it struck. Then blue fire burst forth in a blast that outlined the bones of the Duskan warrior before it hurled them, fleshless and glowing, around the room.
Aerindel felt a painful tug on her scalp. Something was pulling her hair—oh, gods, no!
Rammast smiled down at her. "It's eating your hair, Lady ... and mind: You're getting your best gown all dirty, rolling around like that. Show a little dignity. Come up at least to your knees. My little pet will take care of your gown after it's bared your scalp. Then you'll be wearing shoes, too, won't you? It should be a good while before it gets around to eating your eyelashes."
Aerindel screamed, rolling frantically in an attempt to dislodge the thing. It was leaving a wet, slimy trail through her hair, and went on biting and tearing as if she'd done nothing, even when she drew her knife and stabbed it repeatedly. It was a thing of magic, immune to her steel.
Rammast smiled indulgently at her then strolled around the room, looking critically at the tapestries and statues. "Your father's taste wasn't as bad as I'd heard," he said grudgingly, ignoring Aerindel's sobs then frantic rise to cast a purging spell on herself.
"Get out of my house!" she snarled at him, as she finally felt the gnawing serpent fade away to nothingness. "You cold-blooded bastard!"
Rammast turned to meet her furious gaze, shook his head with a disapproving sigh, and opened his hand again. Another serpent flew from his hand, and as she screamed in despair, he chuckled heartily and strolled in her direction.
"Perhaps your gown first, and the hair later," he suggested. "I suspect you're the superior of any of these rather contorted maids on pedestals your father collected. Was your mother particularly ugly, or did he just have odd

tastes?"
Through tears of utter fury Aerindel spat her last battle-spell, sending a ravening purple cloud of flesh-eating radiance in his direction.
"Oooh," Rammast said in appreciation. "My, my." And he faded away, leaving her spell with nothing to slay. It rolled out over the lake, vainly seeking something to kill.
Abruptly the darkly handsome Lord of Grand Thentor was standing beside her, a mocking smile on his face, as his second serpent flashed down over her shoulder to sink its fangs into her bodice.
Aerindel screamed.
"On your knees, lady," Rammast suggested gently. "Remember?"
He waved a hand, and she felt an unseen force pressing her down. With a snarl she hissed her last dispel, wiping it away along with the sharp-fanged serpent.
He smiled even more broadly, and opened his hand again. Another serpent flapped its wings in his palm, eyeing her with glittering amusement.
"Perhaps one eyelash," her foe said calmly, "to remember me by."
And as the serpent sprang from his hand, Aerindel found that she had no spells left. Clapping her hands protectively over eyes that streamed tears of rage and despair, she snarled a certain word.
On the wall beside the shattered window, the Stormstaff flashed into life and lightings lashed forth like great tentacles to encircle the Thentan intruder and drag him up into the air.
Even as he struggled in the grip of its awesome energies, and the white fire of its fury burst forth from his skin, Rammast smiled down at her. "So that is how paltry your spells are—and those are the words that awaken your father's staff. My thanks, Aerindel. You've been most helpful, if far more feeble a foe than I'd thought. Don't bother taking

your own life; I shall merely bring you back from death to serve me."
The lightnings were beginning to tear him apart now, but the Lord of Grand Thentor showed no pain as he added, "You might fix your hair and change your gown, though. I will come for you."
Then, with a last sneering smile, his false body faded away, leaving her lightnings nothing to ravage.
The Lady of Dusklake sent them racing out over the lake before they could do any harm to the hall or any of her folk, then went to her knees and wept for a long time in the shattered chamber.
When she could weep no more, Aerindel fell silent and threw herself full-length onto the floor. Lying with the smooth stone cold and hard against one cheek, she murmured the words that would bring the comforting length of the Storm-staff into her hands.
It flew to her, and she clutched it like a drowning sailor clings to a spar as she went down into haunted darkness...
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"L-lady? Lady Aerindel?" one of the chamberlasses called tentatively.
The woman who lay curled up like a child around a staff clenched in her hands moved her head and murmured something.
"Lady Aerindel? Great Lady... are you well?"
Abruptly the wild-haired figure in the tattered black gown sat upright and stared into the moonlight. The staff in her hands thrummed once, and tugged at her grasp.
Aerindel screamed in anguish. Rammast must be calling it from afar!
It was her last weapon... her last hope. The staff moaned and wrenched at her numbed fingers again, and Aerindel came to her feet with another raw scream, wrapping herself around it.
She stood panting in the pitiless moonlight, staring around

the ruined hall and wondering just what she could do against the ruthless Lord of Grand Thentor. The staff snarled against her bosom again, and Aerindel snarled back at it in frustration.

In the brief silence that followed, she heard the frightened sobs of the fleeing chamberlass echoing back to her down one of the kitchen passages, and drew in a long, shuddering breath.

She had fought and had been overmastered with contemptuous ease. There were no hidden tricks or lurking spells left to her. She was doomed, and Dusklake with her.

As her father had once said to an excited Dabras, looking down at a battle in Glimmerdown Pass from the top of Mount Glimmerdown, with Aerindel sitting huddled against her nurse, "It's all over now but the praying."

But the praying...

Well, what else could she do?

Aerindel tucked the Stormstaff under her chin and rushed from the hall, padding through the darkened passages of the castle toward a certain dusty and neglected back stair. Many of the torches were unlit, and there were neither guards nor servants to be seen. Had they all fled? Or had some dark magic sent by Rammast slain them all?

Their fates were worries for later. Right now, she had to find, in the deepening darkness beyond the pantries, the way down to the family crypt.

In the end, though she feared to awaken it, Aerindel was forced to use the Stormstaff to conjure a faint radiance, or risk breaking her neck falling down unseen steps to the gate adorned with the split oak Summertyn badge.

Her father's staff made a strange, muted sound, like many voices chanting a wordless, endless chorus, but obeyed her, with none of the tugging it had displayed in the feast hall. Perhaps Rammast's spells couldn't reach it down here.

Aerindel lacked the key that others would need, but she was of the blood of Summertyn, and a quick bite of her hand

brought forth red blood that she could dab on the badge. At its touch, there was a faint singing sound, and the gate opened.

The door beyond had no lock or fastening, and she pushed it inwards with her foot, smelling the familiar damp, earthy smell that always clung to the resting place of her forebearers.

There was the long, slender casket of Haerindra, the mother she'd never known. Beyond it, the high canopied tomb of Orbrar, and to the right, the great black coffin of her father.

The Stormstaff hummed, a deep groan that was echoed by the black stone that enclosed her father's ashes—and Aerindel nearly turned and fled. This had never happened before.

A light—a faint glow of the air, not a spark or flame—occurred suddenly in front of her, in the open space between the three caskets she knew. By its brightening radiance she saw other coffins, stretching back into dark, vaulted distances, and the source of the light: a blue-white star glowing on a simple stone marker.

The altar of Mystra. It had been a long time—too long—since she'd knelt there to pray for guidance. She went to her knees in a rush. Drops of blood from her hand fell upon the stone, and startled her by flaring instantly into smoke that drifted around her, then faded away as abruptly as it had come.

"Mother of Mysteries," she whispered, "I have neglected you and failed in my diligence at crafting your holy Art of magic... but I need you now, and have come to beg forgiveness and plead for guidance. Holy Mystra, aid me!"

"Aid is at hand," a faint whisper came out of the darkness to her right. Aerindel was so startled that she almost dropped the staff.

A moment later, she realized that it was sinking... sinking into the solid stone she was kneeling on!

She tugged on it, but was as overmatched as if she'd been

trying to hold back a surging stallion. The staff moved powerfully downwards, burning her clutching fingers as it slid between them, going down into stone that had no hole nor mark, and was cool and hard under her fingertips after it was gone.

Mystra had taken—reclaimed—the Stormstaff. What sort of aid was this?

Kneeling in the near-darkness, Aerindel heard the faint whisper again: "Set aside fear, and put me on."

She peered into the gloom, seeking the source of that softest of voices. It repeated its message, and by the rasping words she located it: a crown, lying atop her father's coffin.

A chill touched her heart. The black stone resting-place of Thabras Stormstaff had been bare of all but dust when she'd first looked at it, moments ago.

And yet she knew this crown. She remembered seeing her father wearing it once or twice, when she was young. Aerindel frowned. It was no part of the regalia of Dusklake, and had disappeared before his death. So far as she4cnew, it had never been in the coffin of Thabras.

She stared at the black stone casket for a moment, considering, but knew she dared not try to open it, even if she'd commanded strength enough to shift its massive lid.

On the altar before her, the blue-white star flashed once then started to fade. At the same time, the crown began to glow.

"Set aside fear, and put me on," the whisper came again.

Aerindel knelt in the dark crypt staring at the circlet, a dark fear rising in her breast, then shrugged. What choice did she have?

If she hesitated, fear might win and send her running from this place—so she made her arms stretch forth without hesitation, and took up the crown.

It was cool in her hand, but not as heavy as it looked. It seemed to tingle slightly as she peered at it. She found no markings nor gems, shrugged again, and settled it on her

head.
All at once, she was shivering as a cold wind seemed to blow through her head, and someone nearby—a woman, both desperate and furious—screamed, "No! You shall not have me!"
Her cry was drowned out in deep, exultant laughter, which bubbled up into the words, uttered in a different voice entirely, "Of course, I can also do—this."
"Oh, Mystra," came the next speaker, a hoarse whisper seeming to speak right into her ear—she turned her head, but there was no one there—"aid me now!"
"This is no time," the next voice said wearily, "for fools to play at wizardry! Watch!"
"Elminster, aid me!"
That cry made Aerindel stiffen, and tears came. It was her father's voice—and "Elminster," she dimly remembered, had been his tutor as well as the wizard he'd loved and trusted most. But what mattered that? "Aid me!" her father had shouted, so anguished and so desperate.
Just as she was. Aerindel sat numbly, the tears trickling down her cheeks, as the voices went on, crying the same things over and over again. Some of them seemed so final. As doomed as she was. As if they were crying out their last words before death...
When she'd heard Thabras say those same three words the fourth time, the spectral tongues seemed to grow fainter, and those that screamed or cried wordlessly died away altogether. Another voice—the insistent whisper she'd heard first—rose over them all. "I am the power you need to keep Dusklake safe, and to destroy Rammast forever."
Aerindel got up, putting a cautious hand to her head to be sure the crown was secure, and looked around the crypt. Above her brows, the crown seemed to wink, then she could see every dark corner as if it were brightly lit.
"I let you see in the dark and pierce all disguises. By my power your eyes can travel afar..."

She was suddenly gazing at an endless sea, silvery under the moonlight, and knew that she was seeing the Great Water that lay west of the Esmeltaran, beyond the Cloud Peaks. Then that vision was swept away and she beheld a woman she did not know rising up out of a furious battle. Bolts of flame burst from the crown and felled screaming warriors, hurling many through the air like broken dolls. She watched a severed arm whirl away by
itself as the crown said, "With me, you can do this."
The scene changed, and she saw a bearded man standing grimly in a dungeon cell. The crown on his brow flashed with white storm-fire, and the stones before him cracked and melted, flowing aside as the busy lightnings cut a man-high tunnel into them. "And this," the crown whispered.
The scene changed again. She was wearing the crown this time, and a hydra was rearing up above her, on a sun-dappled forest path somewhere, snapping its jaws horribly. The crown seemed to quiver, then the hydra was shrinking and twisting, flailing its long necks vainly as it hardened into a gnarled, triple-trunked tree. "And this," the whisper came again, "among many more powers... if you have the courage to wield them."
"How? " the Lady of Dusklake asked aloud, almost choking in excitement.
There was a warmth within her and a surge of . . . satisfaction?
What followed felt uncomfortable, slithering, and somehow private, as the crown seemed to harness itself to her will. Aerindel shuddered as energy flowed both icy and warm within her, coiling in her vitals and rushing out to her fingertips. She heard a moan that was almost a purr, and realized hazily that it must have come from her own lips.
Then the strangeness was gone, and she was herself again.
Feeling leaping hope and a certain restlessness, the Lady of Dusklake knelt again at the altar to thank Mystra, sprang up, and whirled around.

As she hurried up the steps, her will quested out ahead of her. Her most urgent need was to find out where Rammast was, and what he was up to.

There was an exclamation in the darkness ahead of her, and the flash of drawn steel. She slowed, but suddenly was seeing not a startled Duskan guard, bowing to her at the head of the crypt stairs with fear in his face and a naked sword in his hand, but the bloody-taloned golden eagle banner of Grand Thentor, fluttering in torchlight.

Torchlight somewhere in a night-dark forest where frightened folk screamed and fled into the trees all around, along a muddy road where the warriors of Grand Thentor strode laughing... a road she knew.

A moment later, Rammast's warband passed by a tavern signboard, and she was sure. Dusking! They were in Dusking, at the other end of her realm—already invading Dusklake, to put her folk to the sword!

A woman screamed in that far place, and Aerindel found herself trembling with rage.

"Take me there!" she snarled. There was an exhilarating surge within her, a moment of terror when the world rushed and flowed, all around . . . then she was standing in the night, in the muddy road through Dusking, with that banner bearing down on her, and a host of men with drawn swords tramping around it.

AThentan soldier hooted at the sight of the fine-gowned lady standing alone in the way before him, and waved the torch he held. "Look, lads! Mine, I tell you, this one's—"

Aerindel bent her grim gaze upon him, her eyes dark with hatred, and willed forth fire. The bobbing torch blossomed into sparks as the crown spat out fire at the one who held it.

The soldier was headless, then half a staggering man, then two quivering legs with nothing above them.

The fire roared like a dragon through the rest of the invaders, tumbling those it did not turn to ashes. Swords melted away in crumbling hands, men shouted then fell

silent, and the reek of burnt flesh rose thick around the Lady of Dusklake as she strode forward.

The last soldier fell with a despairing, bubbling scream. She watched his flesh melt from his bones amid greasy smoke and looked down the empty, ashen street to be sure she had destroyed every last Thentan.

In the distance, along the road, something glowed in the night. She willed the crown to take her to it—and found herself looking into the angry eyes of Rammast Tarangar. The glow of the magic that had brought him was still fading around his limbs. He snarled at her in astonishment and a ring flashed on one of his hands as he raised it and made a punching motion at her.

A magic that would have twisted her into a toad-thing plucked at her limbs; the crown told her what it was, shattered it, and sent a withering ray at the Lord of Grand Thentor.

Rammast staggered back, alarm clear on his suddenly pale face, as a ward around him was overwhelmed and cast down in an instant, and the ray bored in at him, clawing at his arm, side, and shoulder.

Gasping and enfeebled, Rammast cast a dispel of his own, banishing the blight the crown had sent him. Aerindel smiled grimly and smashed him to the ground with a stabbing thrust of force. Watching him writhe as ribs snapped and he grunted and sobbed in pain, she mustered all she knew of what the crown could do, and bored in at him again, seeking to see into his mind.

Rammast's frightened eyes filled her vision. He gibbered like a mindless thing in fear of her as the crown carried her through his pain, hatred, and awareness of the hard ground beneath him... and on into what he had been thinking about, and where he had been.

A vision unfolded in her mind: his vision. She saw a great company of armed warriors, harness creaking as they filed through a narrow way in the mountains. Gods above! She

was seeing the main army of Grand Thentor, invading the other end of Dusklake, hard by her castle—through the narrow, perilous Glimmerdown Pass!

The vision was shattered. The crumpled turf before her was bare; Rammast had managed to work a magic that tore him free from Dusking and her scrutiny, and whirled him away to safety.

Aerindel shrugged. She had to be gone from here herself—to the windswept top of Mount Glimmerdown, forthwith!

"To will it is to do the deed," the crown whispered, as seductively as any lover ... and she found herself standing elsewhere, on bare stone with a cool breeze sliding past. She was on the mountaintop where her father had triumphed, so long ago. There were faint saddle-creakings and the snortings of restive horses from the dark cleft below her.

The Lady of Dusklake looked down hard-eyed at the invaders she could not see and felt rage building within her.

Across empty air was the sister peak to the one she stood on, High Glimmerdown; the moonlight showed her its ragged edge. "Down," Aerindel whispered to it, gesturing into the cleft between the two heights. "Go down on them."

She gathered her will, pointed at the rocks across the pass, and gestured grandly, downwards. A few stones broke free and fell, bouncing down out of sight.

There were crashes and startled shouts from below, but Aerindel did not hear them. She was swaying in the night, feeling weak and sick. She went to her knees to avoid following the rocks down into the pass, and clutched at her head. What was wrong with her?

She felt. . . strange. The Lady of Dusklake gritted her teeth. Whatever her malady, her realm needed her now, before those men with their swords got out among her sleeping folk, and stormed a castle that had no more than a dozen men awake to defend it... if she were lucky.

They were hurrying in the cleft below her, now, and a man who'd been screaming abruptly fell silent. Sworded by his

own comrades to keep from rousing her people, no doubt.
Aerindel clenched her fists, glared again at the rocks of High Glimmerdown, and hissed, "Down! Smash away the mountainside and send it down to bury them!"
A red rain seemed to burst inside her head, and she was suddenly lying on her face on hard rock, as the roar of falling rock rose up around her, amid ragged screams from below.
The Lady of Dusklake clung to her own name, gasping in a sudden sea of confusion. Who was she? Where was she? She seemed to be drifting in mists, and folk wearing her crown were there too; she glimpsed them from time to time. All of them had sad faces and looked weary and wasted. They grew older and more shriveled as she watched, wasting away...
She heard shouts and curses from below, and someone snarling to "Abandon the horses! We've blades enough to slaughter a dozen Duskan garrisons, you fools! Just get out of this pass before they can send us any more rockfalls! Move, damn you!"
Aerindel swallowed. She hadn't crushed them all. She raised her eyes again to the freshly-scoured face of High Glimmerdown, much changed where rocks as big as cottages had broken away, and fought to stay awake.
A yellow haze was rising behind her eyes to blot out the night. "Down," she whispered, trembling on the stones, "go down upon them all. Let not aThentan man survive, to swing his sword in my fair Dusklake."
The crown surged again, and Aerindel felt pain in every joint as well as in her breast, head, and belly. She groaned aloud, trying to writhe on the stones but finding her limbs too weak to lift.
The stones were shaking, though—shaking with a deep, teeth-rattling roar that grew louder and faster and finally thunderous, as High Glimmerdown poured itself down into the mountain pass, stones shrieking like women in pain as the dust rose and the host of Grand Thentor was buried

alive.

Aerindel bounced bloodily across the quaking moun-taintop and fetched up against a jagged knob of rock. The dust-shrouded ruin of the pass gaped in front of her as she retched, sobbed, and spasmed uncontrollably. Despite her tumblings, the crown seemed welded to her temples, and by the faint light it began to emit, through no doing of hers, she saw that her hands were as wrinkled as those of an old woman.

The crown fed on its wearers, somehow. Aerindel held that thought for a time, but her wits seemed to wander again. Memory showed her boulders bouncing and rolling down the side of High Glimmerdown, but she could not think of the next thing...

Just as she'd stood waiting in the feast hall, dreading the coming of Rammast but knowing no clever thing she could do...

Rammast. He could still be up to something! She had to see him, to know what he was doing. Coming to strike at her in her chambers at the castle, if she knew him—but not yet. She'd hurt him, at Dusking, and he'd go to banish the pain before anything else. He'd heal and take up new spells and magic weapons, before he came seeking her.

No, he'd be in his tower. Tarangar Tower, highest turret of the frowning stone fortress of Thentarnagard, at the very heart of Grand Thentor. Lying on her face on the stone, head throbbing, Aerindel wondered if she could still farsense.

She could. It hurt—gods, it hurt!—but as the fires of agony clawed at her limbs and she whimpered and writhed on the cold stones of Mount Glimmerdown, she seemed to be flying through the night, seeking the dark sword of Tarangar Tower stabbing at the stars. There would be lights in its high window, she knew, and a darkly handsome Lord working furiously to gird himself for her doombringing...

There! Like a Thentan eagle she swooped out of the night, racing up to those lighted windows, seeking the hated face

of her foe. She saw him at last, striding across a room whose tables were littered with maps. He seemed to sense her, stiffening and peering at the window. She was past by then, winging her way around Tarangar Tower and climbing, seeing the steep roofs of Thentor-town spread out below her down narrow, lamplit cobbled streets. She soared toward the moon, willing the crown to blast the tower behind her apart.

She saw it shattering into tiny rocks, bursting into a cloud of stones that would rain down on all of Grand Thentor, leaving behind a pit so deep that all Thentarnagard would totter and then fall into it, sliding into oblivion shrouded in rock-dust, just as the Thentan army in Glimmerdown Pass had met its end.

"This thing can come to pass," the voice of the crown seemed to whisper in the ear, "but it is a very great thing. Doing it will consume a life."

"Many lives, I should think," Aerindel murmured aloud, her forehead resting on the hard stones of the mountaintop.

"The life of a being who can wield magic," the crown whispered. "A being you have touched while wearing me."

"A deliberate sacrifice, then," the Lady of Dusklake said wearily. "Or a murder."

"If I can get no other essence," the crown told her, "I will claim the life-force of the one who wears me."

"So if I force you to bring down the tower," Aerindel said, "Tarangar Tower will fall, but I'll wither and die here, on this mountaintop."

"The tower may survive if it bears strong enough protective magics," the crown replied. "I must feed soon in any case, or shatter."

Aerindel lay silent, cold fear slowly creeping through her. She had willingly chained herself to some evil thing that would be her doom. Picturing herself tumbling down the mountainside as a desiccated bag of skin with loose bones bouncing and rolling inside it, she forced her trembling limbs to move.

Snarling with the effort, the Lady of Dusklake moved her arms along the uneven stone, very slowly and very painfully. She was gasping and drenched with cold sweat when at last her fingertips touched the crown.

It tingled, but did not budge. No matter how hard she clawed and tugged at it, it seemed attached to her head. The Whispering Crown would not come off.

She rolled over, finally, to stare despairingly at the stars. She had slain men who did not matter, and crippled herself in doing so—leaving herself and her realm helpless against their real foe. All too soon, Rammast would return. Rested, strong, and ready to slay—and she'd be lying here, too weak to do anything. And with the crown and her to sacrifice in doing the first mighty thing he wanted of it, he would endanger all the Esmeltaran.

She felt like crying, but Aerindel Summertyn had no tears left. Bleeding, bitten, half-shorn and dressed in tatters, she lacked the strength even to stand up. She lay on Mount Glimmerdown and looked up at the bleakly twinkling stars, waiting for Rammast's sneering smile to come into view above her.

Instead, the face that finally loomed up to blot out the stars was an unfamiliar one; a sharp-nosed face adorned with a long beard and blue eyes that held the wisdom of ages. It belonged to a man who wore simple, worn robes. His hands were empty, and he looked down at her with something—admiration? sympathy? cynical amusement?—flickering in his eyes.

"Take the crown off now, Lady of Dusklake," this stranger said curtly, "before it's too late."

Aerindel looked up at him, too weak and weary to care how she looked, or how he knew her name. "Does any mage fighting for her land and herself throw away her best weapon?" she spat wearily, wanting to be alone in her misery, wandering in the welcoming mists.

"Aerindel, do ye want to end up as thy father did?" the

stranger asked gravely.
Aerindel felt anger kindling in her. Why did everyone in Faerun know about the fate of Thabras Stormstaff except her?
"Who are you?" she snapped, eyes flashing. "How is it you know of my father?"
The bearded face bent closer; the man was kneeling beside her. "I trained him in the ways of magic, and made him what he became."
He looked across the pass at High Glimmerdown for a moment, then down at her again and added softly, "And so, I suppose, am responsible for his doom. I am called Elminster."
"Elminster," she repeated, huskily. Fresh energy surged through her, and the crown whispered inside her head, Destroy this one. His magic is strong, very strong. He is a danger to us both—and his power is just what I need to smash Tarangar Tower and Rammast with it.
"How?" she asked it, not caring if she spoke the word aloud.
Look at him, and will forth fire, as you did to the soldiers at Dusking, and I'll strike. Keep the flow unbroken, after, so that I can draw his life-force back to us.
Aerindel smiled, slowly, as it was done.
Fire roared forth and the kneeling man shuddered and flinched back, but it licked only briefly at his robes, seeming to be drawn into his eyes... eyes that darkened and seemed somehow to become larger.
Yessss, the crown hissed in her, and she felt a warm glow of exultation.
Elminster rose and stepped away, and Aerindel turned her head to keep him in view, as the crown had urged her to. There came a sharp pain in her head, and a shaft of pure rage from the crown that made her gasp and writhe on the stones.
"No, cursed one!" the crown snarled, out of her trembling lips.

Elminster ignored it, raising a hand to slice off the line of flame as if it were a strand of spiderweb. "Aerindel," he said urgently, bending near again, "take off the crown. Please."
The crown flashed, and Aerindel felt fresh energy flowing into her. The crown urged her to do thus, and so—and she did.
Green lightnings flashed forth from her brow to crackle hungrily up that extended arm, outlining it with writhing flames. Elminster grimaced, and clear annoyance flashed across his face for a moment as he made a brushing-away gesture.
Astonishingly, the green lightning sprang away from him to trail away into the cool night breeze. Aerindel felt annoyance of her own—or rather, it came from the crown, along with more instructions.
She did as she was bid, and a searing white flame burst into being, hurling the bearded man back. He staggered, shoulders shaking as the ravening white fire tore into him, and the Lady of Dusklake found herself strong enough to stand. She scrambled up, conscious of a glow around her head.
The crown was flashing ever-brighter as she stretched out her hands and lashed Elminster with conjured tentacles that snapped and bit at him like hungry eels with long, barbed jaws.
"Aerindel," he cried, sounding almost in anguish, "fight against it! Obey not the crown! 'Tis a thing that twists its wearers to evil if allowed to command! Ye must order it, not let it enthrall ye!"
"Die, mage, and quickly," Aerindel hissed back at him. "All this time, Rammast grows stronger, and the folk in my castle aren't even warned and awake! Die, or leave me be!"
She lashed him with ropes of twisting fire, spun him around, and hurled him out over the chasm that had been Glimmerdown Pass.
But he did not plummet to his death. Instead, he stood on

empty air as if it were solid rock and pointed at her. "Aerindel, I charge thee: do off the Whispering Crown—now!"

"Never!" Aerindel shouted at him, hurling the might of the crown at the rocks they stood upon, tearing them up in long, jagged shards to hurl at the wizard.

Elminster gave her a weary look and murmured some words. The stony spears turned to dust in the air between them. He said something else, and made a gesture—and Aerindel felt a coldness that seemed to start at her feet and race up and out her throat.

She could do nothing but see straight ahead as she quivered upright in midair, but the crown let her see everything: Elminster had transformed her into a long, thin staff of wood, such as a wizard might carry.

Taller than the Stormstaff she was, floating and glowing with a white radiance that seemed to tear at the crown. With no head to support it, the circlet fell down the length of her, its frantic whisperings fading, and rang on the stones. Elminster snatched her away from it, strode two swift paces, and let go of her.

The coldness drained away swiftly, and Aerindel was herself once more—standing facing him, panting in fear and fury, the ruins of her gown hanging from bared, moonlit shoulders, her once-beautiful hair a gnawed ruin. She looked older, her skin mottled and hanging in wrinkles. Her eyes were sunken, and her mouth pinched, as if with great age. Even in her rage, confronting him with heaving bosom, she was stooped, hunched over with hands that had become the knob-jointed claws of a crone.

"Go away, wizard!" she snarled, eyes like twin flames. "You've meddled more than enough! I need the crown to defend my land and... myself. Rammast shall get neither, if you'll just stand aside and let me use what Mystra sent me! It was her gift to me!"

"Mystra gives gifts that carry choices," Elminster tola her

quietly, his eyes on hers. The crown glimmered on the rocks behind him. "Each one is a test. No sword is deadly until a hand wields it."
"Bah!" Aerindel spat. "I've no time for gentle philosophy, mage! Dusklake is imperilled! Rammast gathers strength even as we stand here arguing! Get out of my way!"
Elminster bowed his head and stepped aside. "The choice must be thine," he said gravely. "So long as ye know that the glow upon yonder circlet now means it must drink the life-force of the first being to don it and work magic, or crumble away."
Aerindel stormed forward, checked herself, shot him a look of anger, and snarled, "Such words are cheap weapons, wizard. How do I know they're true?"
Elminster shrugged. "Ye must trust in someone else at some time; why not begin now? If I'm right and ye heed me not, ye'll die. If ye heed me, I make this pledge: I'll stand beside ye to defend Dusklake against this Rammast, and teach ye enough magic so that ye'll need no crown nor wizardry aid hereafter. What say ye?"
Aerindel's eyes narrowed as she looked at him. Then her face twisted and she tossed what was left of her hair angrily. "What assurance have I that you'll keep this pledge? I don't know you—your word could be worthless!"
Elminster shrugged. "So it might. It comes back to trust, doesn't it?"
Aerindel waved her hand at him spurningly as she strode past. "Enough clever words, wizard! This I know, have wielded, and can understand!" She bent and snatched up the crown.
"Remember!" the wizard called. "It must now drink the life-force of the first magic-wielder wearing it, or crumble!"
It glowed at her, invitingly, pulsing, its cool radiances running up her arms in what were almost caresses. The Whispering Crown gave forth a faint chiming, as of distant bells, and a feeling of warmth and reassurance. Aerindel

drank it in, looked at Elminster with a silent challenge in her eyes, and raised the crown to put it on.
"Yesss," its whispering voice was hissing, as she raised it past her face. But then another voice burst from it, desperate and alone, echoing in strident despair.
"Elminster, aid me!"
Her father's cry was louder than before.
Aerindel stared at the crown, hearing it snarl angrily. Under those angry growls the cries of others came faintly to her ears. Those who died wearing it. Its other victims.
"Farewell, father," she said, voice trembling, as she turned on her heel and threw the Whispering Crown hard and high.
Out, out over Glimmerdown Pass it flew, howling in angry despair. It spat out lightnings at her as it fell, lightnings that clawed at the rocks by her feet then fell far short as the crown tumbled from view.
The moonlight seemed brighter as Aerindel turned into the cool breeze, squinted at the wizard, and asked timidly, "Elminster?"
The bearded man gave her a smile that lit up his face as he took her hand. "The right choice, Aerindel. Ye used yon crown for what Mystra put it into your hands for, and let it go when she wanted ye too. Come, now. Mystra will protect ye. Ye shall learn magic as thy father did."
An amber light whirled up around their joined hands, to shroud them both in a whirling cloud—a cloud that flashed blue-white and faded, leaving the mountaintop bare.
An instant later, lightnings crashed down on the mountaintop, hurling what stones they did not scorch high into the air. The night crackled and glowed with the fury of that strike.
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"There's no way they could have survived that," the Lord of Grand Thentor said with satisfaction, looking up from where he stood among the tumbled rocks that now choked Glimmerdown Pass. His men were under all this, somewhere

—but who needed warriors, in lands where one was the only wielder of magic?
"I wonder who that wizard was," Rammast mused aloud as he clapped his hands together and prepared to cast a flying spell to whisk him over the rocks into Dusklake. He shrugged. Well, he'd fly up over the mountaintop, just to be sure the mysterious mage was no more than ashes and memories.
It was a pity about Aerindel, but he had her likeness fixed in an evermirror spell and could alter the shape of some hired wench or other to take her place. Even if word got out, there'd be none to stand against him ere Dusklake joined Grand Thentor, and he looked to richer lands to the west, like Marbrin and Drimmath. Why, he could be ruling an empire in four winters' ti—
Amber light flared momentarily atop the mountain, high above. Frowning, Rammast peered up at it.
Something clanged on the rocks nearby and bounced past his foot with a metallic clang. The crown!
His lightning must have blasted it from her head!
Smiling, Rammast snatched it up. Gods, but it had given her power enough! With this, Rammast Tarangar would be well-nigh invincible!
He'd call his realm Tarangara, when it stretched from the Great Water to the Inland Sea, and from the High Forest to the hot lands... Yes, by Mystr—
He was still smiling broadly as he settled the Whispering Crown onto his head.
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"Look ye now," Elminster said gravely. One of his arms was around her shoulders; he pointed with the other. Down at the tumbled stones where there had once been a pass. Down at a lone, gloating man: Rammast, Lord of Grand Thentor. He was putting on the Whispering Crown!
Aerindel bit her lip and tried to blink away the tears that had been falling since she'd realized what the Crown had done

to her. She was old and wrinkled, her life stolen from her... and all for magic. "Mystra will protect ye." Hah.
Yet at least Rammast would die, unless the goddess had played one last trick on her ... but no. Her distant foe had raised his hands grandly to cast a spell of farseeing—and was suddenly crumpling, falling, and dwindling into a dark and twisted thing, skin hanging on a skeleton that was toppling
into cinnamon-hued dust. Sweet, surging energies welled up in her, raising her, and making her gasp and tremble in a rapture more intense than anything she'd ever felt before.
Aerindel found herself sobbing, clinging to the comforting arms around her as she shuddered, then kissing the half-seen face above her wildly, joy surging through her. Her skin was smooth and young again, her body her own!
"Ye see," that kind voice rumbled, by her ear. "These things work out. Mystra does provide. Ye have only to trust, think clearly, and do as She guides."
"And how will I know her directives? " the Lady of Dusklake asked, brushing hair aside from shining eyes to meet his gaze.
Elminster pointed down again. Something gleamed amid skeletal dust far below. Aerindel saw it only for an instant before the lightnings of a spell that no mortal had cast erupted along the cliff across from where they stood and sent a huge fall of stones rolling down to bury the Whispering Crown.
As the dust rose up toward them, Elminster replied solemnly, "She whispers to us always."
"Elminster," Aerindel said with a tremulous smile, "aid me!"
Introduction
SO HIGH A PRICE
And if every spell has its price, so to does everything else in life.
Many are the prices measured, considered, and paid in this tale of how the Zhentarim came to hold sway in Zhentil

Keep.
Few folk ofFaerun who can't hurl spells realize that those who command magic think of consequences and costs. Most of them cleave to the attitude once expressed eloquently by Volo thus: "I guess wizards don't think before they speak any more than kings do. Still, this tendency makes grand pronouncements prime entertainment for those of us who don't have to live with their effects."
Among other things, what follows explains why Elminster and other mages of power don't just lash out at foes and creatures and things that happen to displease them, on mere whim—or even use their magic to hurl down forces of great evil, that in time to come will wreak much harm on all they hold dear. As the "old" goddess Mystra is reputed to have murmured, at the moment of her passing: "All debts must be paid."
Payment of such is brisk in Zhentil Keep in the spring of the Year of the Blazing Brand (1334 DR), and most of the trade begins, with our story, on the twenty-third day ofMirtul, as the mage known as Manshoon looks out a window, and smiles...
SO HIGH A PRICE
So high a price So willingly paid Hot blood flows And a ruler is made.
Mintiper Moonsilver Ballad of a Tyrant Year of the Turret
Sunlight flashed on the pinnacles of the highest towers in Zhentil Keep and flung dazzling reflections through windows nearby. It was a hot day in Mirtul, in the Year of the Blazing Brand.
A small, brown ledgebird darted past one window, wheeled in the air on nimble wings, and merrily gave out its tiny call, like a carefree bugle. But then, it did not know how little time it had left to live.
A man looked out of the window, smiled slightly, and crooked a finger. The bird exploded in a puff of vivid green flames.

Manshoon watched the scorched feathers drift away and went on idly humming the latest popular minstrels' tune. Trust a bird of Zhentil Keep to be out of time, and off-key. Well, no longer.

Manshoon looked down on the city below. He'd soon be looking down from a far loftier tower, if all worked out as he'd planned. His robes were of the finest purple silk, worked with rearing behirs in cloth-of-gold; his sleeves were the latest flaring fashion and his upswept high collar was of the sort only lords should wear. His jet-black hair gleamed in the sunlight as he leaned forward out of the window to better see the streets below. A slight shimmer in the air marked the closing of the invisible curtain of protective magics that surrounded him, in the wake of the scorcher spell he'd used on the bird.

A soft, deep chime sounded in the depths of the tower. It was followed by the faintest of stirrings as Taersel drew a hanging aside and murmured, "Fzoul Chembryl, my lord."

Manshoon nodded and signed that Taersel should withdraw and return by one of the side passages to stand unseen behind a tapestry nearby. Taersel touched the hilt of the concealed throwing knife built into the ornate buckle of his belt to show he'd understood.

The man who was shown through the hanging a breath or so later looked like a well fed, self-important merchant, grand cap set on the side of his head with arrogant self-assurance — no doubt to cover a balding spot—rings agleam on his fingers, and robes of the latest slashed and counter-folded Calishite finery. He bowed and husked, "We are alone, great lord?"

Manshoon nodded. "We are." The figure facing him flickered, seemed to melt and run riotous colors for a moment, and then spun into sharp focus once more, revealing the lionine mane, somber robes, and familiar features of Fzoul, High Priest of The Black Altar.

"The time is at hand?"

Manshoon nodded. "I grow weary of the sniping, petty threats, and backstreet whispers of these haughty nobles, and haven't the time or interest to spare for hunting them down one by one, in their lairs." He smiled. "Let it be done all at once. Dramatic, bloody, impressing those who watch, and goading the High Imperceptor into even more reckless bids to regain the temple from you."

Fzoul showed his teeth in a smile of more cruelty than mirth, and said, "Savaging the hands he sends to smite us will be pleasure indeed, but be warned: If my priests are to remain useful, we of the Altar must be seen to take no part in your bid for power. None of my faithful will stand against you, but neither dare we work openly for you."

Manshoon inclined his head. "It is enough." He indicated a nearby decanter of black wine with a slow wave of his hand, .but Fzoul shook his head, shivered, and the fat merchant faced Manshoon once more.

"There'll be time enough for drinking when this is done, and your title is more than empty words, First Lord," came the husky, false voice of the merchant.

Slowly, very slowly, Manshoon nodded again.

The decanter's level had fallen by half when the hangings parted again, and another man came through them to see Manshoon. He moved with a strange gliding motion, this one, as if his soundless feet didn't quite touch the floor. Taersel treated him with careful, silent respect.

The First Lord of Zhentil Keep, whose mind had been far away, going over every detail and dovetailing manipulation of his plans, opened eyes that were very dark and said coldly, "Yes?"

His guest straightened, flinging off the worn and stained gray weathercloak, and answered as coldly, "I presume you're finally ready to move?"

"I believe so."

The long-haired man facing him might have been a barbarian, but for the soft, unfinished look of his features. At

a second glance, most Zhent folk would have guessed him a mongrelman, not quite human at all, and drawn back with mutters and wary touches of whatever weapons they bore.

They'd have been right. The hair melted and fell away as the features swam, grew white and glistening, and parted in the center to reveal a green and liquid eye. It grew and grew, until Manshoon was looking into the gaze of a single giant eye in a spherical head that bobbed at the end of a long, stalklike neck, swaying as it regarded him. The body beneath hung shrunken and empty, like discarded clothes drooping from a wall-peg.

"Speak, then," the cold voice came again, a hissing, rumbling edge now audible within it. "I've little patience for humans who enjoy being mysterious."

Manshoon gave the thing a wintry smile, and said, "It is to be open slaughter, as you wished, at the coming Council meeting. Those who oppose me—you know them—are to be slain. When effective rule of Zhentil Keep is in my hands, your own plans and wants will be addressed. So long as our ways lie together, your kind will have what they most desire: rule of a powerful city of men, full of hands to do your bidding, fresh meat to feed you, and strong men who will fear you and kneel before you."

"Do not presume," the cold voice responded, as the human body dwindled almost to nothing and the spherical head grew larger, drifting slightly closer, "to understand my kind so well. Most of all, Manshoon, do not presume to understand—or order about—me."

Fleshy, writhing protuberances sprouted from the spherical body like giant worms, and a soft gasp and a clatter came from behind the tapestry where Taersel was hiding. A moment later, a crossbow bolt whipped across the floor of the chamber with a loud and vicious crack.

Eyes opened in the ends of the still-growing stalks. The tapestry was drawn aside by an invisible hand to reveal the dark mouth of a passage beyond, and lying sprawled on its

stones, the motionless, face-down form of Taersel, a crossbow still clutched in his nerveless hands. Thin wisps of smoke rose from what remained of the protective amulets he'd worn about his wrists.

"It is not wise," the cold voice of the eye tyrant said silkily, "to threaten 'our kind.'"

Manshoon stared into its many clustered eyes and replied steadily, "I am too useful to expend, and too wise to mean by this what you accuse me of. The man is as useful to me as I am to you. I trust he has not been harmed."

"He has not been harmed . . . yet." The beholder grew larger, its eyes flashing yellow in displeasure. "Unless he takes great care, however, that day will soon come."

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"Unless you take great care," Lord Chess said, leaning forward in his chair in an inner room of another tower, not far away, "that day will soon come."

The other nobles at the table shifted in their own chairs. Some hid their nervousness by flamboyant sips of the potent golden lion-wine of Mulhorand in their goblets. Others smiled in a superior manner and settled themselves into even more indolent poses in the great, fine-carved chairs in which they lounged.

"We have no fear of upstart priests, nor of ambitious merchants elsewhere in the Realms," one said with a practiced sneer. "Our fathers smashed such foes in their day—and their fathers, too, before that. Why should we quake at such news? The least of our guards will destroy them."

"Aye," another agreed, amid general murmurs of approval. "So what if the graybeards yap and snap at each other in Council all the day long? Let them! I see naught in Faerun that threatens Zhentil Keep, nor stands in the way of our coins piling up. The Council moves in time whenever those dolts in Mulmaster dare yet another challenge* or a Thayan wizard sinks so far in decadence that he loses his wits and thinks to come and rule us—and the rest of the time, it

keeps our fathers and the dotards busy, their noses out of our own affairs!"
"And just how many affairs has it been, Thaerun? " another noble asked slyly.
"Aye, this tenday?" added another, amid general mirth.
Chess frowned. "Have you no care at all for snakes in our midst? Agents of Thay, of the Cult of the Dragon—even of Sembia and Calimshan—are uncovered every month! The points of their daggers are always close—closer than you credit!"
"Ah," Thaerun said, leaning forward to tap the table in front of him in triumphant emphasis. "That's the point, Chess. They are uncovered, by the watchful wizards Manshoon commands and by Fzoul's tame priests. That's why we tolerate those haughty longrobes in our city in the first place! They watch behind our backs, so we can get on with the business of getting rich!"
"And wenching," someone murmured. "Drinking," another added, and someone asked, "What is this chamberpot-spill, anyway, Chess?"
"The finest Mulhorand vintage," Chess said dryly. "Not that I expected you to recognize it, Naerh."
Naerh spat insolently onto the table. "That's for your pretensions! My family is as old as yours!"
"And as debauched," Thaerun murmured, and there was a general roar of laughter.
Chess smiled thinly. "You would do well to enjoy your ease while you have it," he said softly. "It is a precious luxury, soon lost if just one of our many foes should decide to go to war."
Thaerun leaned forward again, his eyes cold. "I do... and I will. Every luxury has its price, yes, but as this one costs only the blood of a few fool money-scuttlers and hireswords from time to time, it's one I'll pay willingly. Save your veiled threats. The Blackryn name is a proud one—one I am always ready to defend." There was a scattering of twinkling points

of light at his wrist, and that hand suddenly held an ornate wand that pulsed and glowed.
Another noble sighed in disgust. "Oh, put it away, Thaerun! You're always trying to prove how battle-bold you are, and managing to show only your lack of subtlety. We've all got one or more of those! You think you're the only one in Zhentil Keep with wits enough to carry magic, when we have to hang our blades up at every door when we party?"
Another noble scratched the scrawny beginnings of a beard and added, "Besides, if you ever use it, Blackryn, 'tis the blood of one or more of us'll be spilt, then the blood-feuds begin again, and that is too high a price for the liking of the Council. They'll put you in beast-shape, to spend your days as a patrol-hound somewhere north of Glister ... until you find death, that is." He leaned forward, uncrossing glossy-booted legs, and said, "Give us more wine here, Chess, and tell me more of that maid with the green hair I saw you with, last eve! I've not laid eyes on her before—where've you been hiding her?"
Chess smiled, as a massive silver tray bristling with bottles and sparkle-cut decanters floated up from the polished wood in front of him and began a slow, drifting journey down the table. "Yes, her hair was green last night. She's one of Manshoon's wizards, Eldarr. The Shadowsil, she's called—and don't even think about it. She could slay us all with one wave of her hand."
"And that, Thaerun," Naerh said dryly, "would also be too high a price for your liking, eh?"
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"I—I'll live, lord," Taersel muttered, hauling himself weakly up out of the chair.
The beholder hung watchfully at the other end of the chamber, its eyestalks curling and reaching like a nest of menacing snakes.
"As I promised," it rumbled.
Manshoon nodded, curtly. "Indeed. What else would you

know?"
The eye tyrant drifted nearer. "You've said your plans will strengthen Zhentil Keep, making it a better tool for our uses, and yet its most able warriors and senior nobles are stricken by the tens and the dozens—this is by your hand, is it not?"
Manshoon shrugged. "I don't deny it. My poisons are slow, however; my enemies fall ill and fail slowly. Their family businesses and stratagems do not collapse with them, but are taken up and carried on by younger, more able hands."
"Hands more loyal to yourself."
"If my plans come to pass, more loyal to you, as well."
The beholder seemed to dwindle, and grew a misshapen tail. As the two men watched, the tail thickened, writhed, and became once more a human body. "When the Council next meets, you shall have our support," it said simply, and turned away.
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When the well-oiled door that led down to the secret ways out had closed behind the last guest's back, Lord Chess sat alone at his table, a full glass forgotten before him. Idly he turned a heavy gold ring around and around on his finger as he thought about Manshoon. Nothing short of an angry god—or two dozen Red Wizards of Thay, or perhaps Elminster—would stop that one now. Manshoon was as powerful in magecraft as he was a cold and cruel strategist, and he'd be the real ruler of Zhentil Keep before the snows came again, for sure.
A year ago, that would have been unthinkable, with all the wily, battle-hardened old nobles of the Keep between the untrustworthy, arrogant mage and mastery of the city. Most of them were fiercely opposed to every member, plan, or work of the swift-rising Zhentarim. No surprise there: all merchants know there's no safety when one must deal with magic.
Then old Iorltar had named Manshoon his successor as First Lord—under magical compulsion or at least under the threat

of magical destruction, many thought—and Manshoon and Fzoul had grown very friendly. Or revealed a long-standing alliance, more like. Then the oldest, proudest nobles—all of whom commanded strong magic of their own, or had no love for the upstart First Lord—had begun to fall ill. Again, no shred of proof could be found. But the whispers in the taverns of the Keep knew the truth. Now the talk was of open violence, soon, and of some sort of secret weapon Manshoon had ready to wield, beyond the tricks of the ever-growing band of "gutter wizards"—ruthless and lawless freewands from all over the lands about the Sea of Fallen Stars—who followed him.

Lord Chess reached for his glass. The ring on his finger gleamed in the lamplight, and he regarded it thoughtfully. It had cost him dear—his best band of adventurers slain to a man by killers whose fees had been expensive indeed—but it had been worth it. He could call a dragon forth from it, in need. He wore it constantly, these days. Manshoon wasn't the only one in the Keep with secret weapons.

"This young wizard has lived far too long already," the High Imperceptor of Bane said softly. The burning light in his pale eyes was reflected in the glossy blackness of the polished marble tabletop. The listening priests nodded at his words, waiting for more in silence.

"If he sees the end of this summer, he may well build Zhentil Keep into a fortress against us. Manshoon must be destroyed." The High Imperceptor swept a glance of fire all around the table, then turned away. "See to it," he added.

"Aye, Dread Lord."

"Report it done by this time on the morrow," the One True Servant of Bane told the wall beside him, "and I shall be pleased." He looked up at the huge Black Hand of Bane that floated above them all, silent and motionless, and murmured, "Fail in this before six nights are out, and Almighty Bane shall be displeased."

"Hear the will of Bane," the gathered priests chanted in

unison. When they looked up, the High Imperceptor was gone from the holy sanctum.
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"He'll move soon." Lord Hael coughed from his canopied bed in the corner of the room. He rarely moved from it now; the stout sticks that helped him keep his once-mighty frame upright were covered with dust.
"At tomorrow's Council meeting, belike," Lord Phandymm said sourly. "With all of us old lions too stick—or too dead—to stand and vote against him."
"It's poison, right enough. Else those with amulets would be laid low like the rest of us," Lord Hael went on, as if he had not heard. "Then that snake's spells will rule the Keep, and bring us all into tyranny, then war, then cold ruin, at the last." He struggled to sit upright in the gloom under the canopy, then shrugged. "At least I'll not be around to see it."
Another of the old nobles turned to look at a younger man, who sat uncertainly on a chair in another corner. "Your father was one of the first, young Belator," he said sharply, "and we know you turned to old Rorst for guidance. What says he, of Manshoon the snake?"
"Aye," Phandymm echoed, "what says Battlelord Rorst Amandon?"
Lord Belator swallowed, nervous under the sudden and unexpected weight of the keen old eyes fixed on him from every corner of the room, and said softly, "The Lord Amandon bade me tell you all this: We have a secret ally, whose name and station shall remain known only to him—until the Council meeting on the morrow, when he'll reveal himself, if he must, to save our collective hides."
There were chuckles. "His exact words, no doubt?"
Belator nodded vigorously. "He made me repeat them, several times."
Hael laughed in the darkness. "Good old Amandon," he said. "There's hope for Zhentil Keep yet."
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The stars glittered in the clear, cold night sky. Manshoon watched them, looking down uncaring and unchanging at the struggles of men, so far below. The lamps of the gods, some called them. There was a sudden flare of light from below him; someone had broken one of his lesser wards with a cleaving spell. He smiled slightly. There'd be an attack tonight, of course.

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She knelt, a dark shadow in the nightgloom of the courtyard, and placed the stasis-scepter carefully upright on the stones before her. It winked once as she released it, and stood upright by itself, holding killing spells, alarms, and enchanted creatures—like the silently-snarling gargoyles at the corners of the courtyard—at bay, immobile and ineffective. They'd still have to beware monsters that masqueraded as stone and pitfall traps full of waiting blades, but few wizards kept many such around their city homes unless they had no friends and an inexhaustible supply of apprentices.

The other six, silent in their felt-soled boots, glided after her as the best thief of Westgate moved to the wall beside the door of Manshoon's tower and started to climb. Her feet clung sure-footed to the stones, and she swarmed swiftly up the wall.

Vrale passed the first window without stopping. A little above it, she twisted aside with sudden urgency as her touch on some stone triggered an old and rusting spear-blade to grate outward, seeking vainly to impale her. Shaking her head, the thief moved sideways and upward for a time, and went on, climbing right up to the claws of another crouching gargoyle.

Its cold eyes moved, watching her—but before her touch could free it into motion, the thief swept another precious stasis-scepter from her belt up into its mouth. It remained immobile as she looped the black climbing-cord around its head and let it fall for the others, waiting below, to follow

her.
Then she drew forth the last and most powerful of the Netherese artifacts she'd been given and held it up before her as she surveyed this last, uppermost window carefully. The smooth glass orb remained dark, with no telltale wink or glow to warn her of magic. Good—as she'd expected. Holding the orb ready before her eyes, she climbed past the window and then descended from above, walking carefully so as to peer into the darkness from the very top of the arch.
The chamber beyond held tapestries, a table, and some other rich furnishings, half-hidden in darkness. The orb showed her the faint glow of a "small things" shield against birds and insects, but the room beyond it, though it held many strong enchantments, was empty of life. The thief extended
one of the thin rods she carried in her boots through the opening, but no blade scythed down and no alarm sounded. She drew back the rod, twisted it onto the end of another rod, and thrust it in farther. Still nothing. Slowly she entered, holding her body tense for many a long breath, waiting to leap out again. Darkness and silence hung unbroken. She screwed the hook onto the end of her doubled rod and reached back out the window to pluck at the cord, twice.
There was an answering quiver from below; they'd started to climb. The thief, ears straining in the heavy silence, peered around the room as she waited, unmoving, clinging to the wall. Things were never safe and simple when you were entering the home of an archmage.
There was a sudden scrabbling sound—shockingly loud in the stillness—from just outside the window. A stony scraping. Heart in her mouth, she saw the dark bulk of the gargoyle rise up past her, blotting out the stars, then saw it hurl the cord away.
The thuds and thumps of the bodies smashing against the suddenly-bright courtyard below were worse than any screams could have been. She fought down her own wild

urge to scream and looked quickly around the room for a place to hide—any place.

Then the darkness in front of her fell away. She was staring into a forest of eyes that stared back unwinking at her from the end of ten eel-like stalks. The dark spherical bulk of their central body was beyond them, floating lazily in the air. Its magic had cloaked it from her and now she felt herself held against the wall by an unyielding force. She was helpless in its power.

"Welcome," it hissed and rumbled, and she heard the cruelty in that lazy greeting. The thief trembled. Through her rising sobs, she whispered, "Kill me quickly. Please."

"Certainly. I shall bite your head off when the time comes."

Light grew in the room beyond. The weeping thief heard a man say pleasantly, "First I need a few questions answered. Then you may want a few moments to beg and plead—and offer to do things for me. I'm looking forward to that." The First Lord of Zhentil Keep strolled into view and waved a finger. The thief felt various metal buttons, fastenings, and weapons darting and tearing their various ways free of her and flying out the window. Her steel-nailed gloves, her belt, her gorget and stomach-armor—most of her clothing left her or was torn to ribbons. She shuddered and closed her eyes.

Then a warm and courteous hand was reaching her down from the wall.

She lashed out with the sharpened smallest fingernail of her hand, but its poison found nothing. The hand was a conjured force, not the man himself. Horrified, she found herself looking into the cold, dark eyes of Manshoon. His smile broadened as she curled her finger to scratch her own palm and felt the burning heat spreading swiftly through her own veins.

"Ah, no. You won't escape me that way. My magic will keep you alive until I'm done with you." Staring at him, Vrale the thief opened lips that were suddenly purple and numb from the poison—and found that her body was no longer her own. Gripped by his spells, she could not even scream.

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The beholder bit down. Blood spattered in all directions as the bare body of the thief twisted and flopped like a landed fish. Lord Rorst Amandon passed a hand over his scrying crystal and the scene faded.

"So passes the hope of the High Imperceptor," he murmured. "Hardly a surprise, and probably not the only unwelcome visitors to Manshoon's tower who'll meet their gods tonight. Still, Etreth, they got farther than I expected."

His hand trembled as he reached for the goblet beside his bed. In a trice, Etreth was there, to bring the drink smoothly into his hand. Both men knew Lord Rorst lay on his deathbed; by the time Manshoon's rare and insidious poison had been detected, its ravages had gone too far in the aged body for mere hired spells to repair, and the most expensive sages reported no known antidote for whatever Manshoon had

used. It was addictive, too; those who tried going without food and water to escape it ended up shuddering, spasming, and crying out for food and drink. The young wizard had been most thorough.

Thorough enough, at least, to slay Lord Rorst Amandon. The old, bearded warrior looked wearily around his bedchamber, his gaze slowing as he looked upon the weight and curve of his favorite broadsword, then on the portrait of his wife, dead and gone these seven years. Well, he might be joining her before morning, whatever befell in the Realms with this mad wizard's schemes.

"I—can hold on no longer, Etreth," he muttered. "My body fails ... so wasted, now, I can barely drink without your aid..."

He raised weary eyes to meet Etreth's gaze. Bright tears stood unshed in his loyal servant's eyes. Rorst turned his head away, moved by the sight. They'd been together for years and before now he'd never noticed the gray creeping through Etreth's hair... why, his moustache was white! The lord gathered all his strength and sat up straight, cushions falling away.

"I may not last the night," Lord Rorst said, in almost his hearty tones of younger years. "So the time is come; I have one last command to lay on thee, good Etreth. Go and summon my ally the way I told you, when all this began."

"Now, Lord? And—and leave you? What if you nee—?"

"I'll do without it," the lord said firmly, "until the one I must deal with is here. Go, Etreth, for the honor of the Amandons." He reached deliberately to set the empty goblet back on the table; it clattered in his trembling hand as it came down. Rorst frowned at it, then raised fierce eyes to regard his watching servant. "Go," he said roughly, "if you care for me at all."

The old servant stood looking at him for a moment, then turned with what sounded like a sob and hurried out. Rorst Amandon nodded, looked at the darkened scrying-crystal for a moment, and wondered if he'd be able to hold on long enough to see this all through. His eyes wandered to Desil's portrait, drank in her familiar painted beautv for lone moments, then

turned again, involuntarily, to the scrying-crystal. He was a man of the sword, he reflected with a wan smile, itching to be doing things until the very last.

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The vast, echoing central chamber of the High Hall of Zhentil Keep was crowded. Its huge, high windows threw bright morning light down the oval well of concentric benches to the central debating floor at its heart. One man stood there; a young man in plain but richly-cut robes, his speech smooth and calm. A man hated more than most, in a

city of many hatreds. Manshoon of the Zhentarim.
The First Lord of Zhentil Keep had deftly moved the Council through several minor items of business, referring a stiff argument over grain import storage to a committee of senior lords for converse before it need be voted on by the Council. Then he began to hew his way toward ruling Zhentil Keep openly, even as the rumors all over the city had hinted. From a stone-faced wizard seated at a front bench he took up a thick sheaf of parchments and waved them around his head. One escaped his grasp and fluttered away. Someone snickered, but Manshoon merely crooked an eyebrow and all the papers began circling his head in a slow and stately ring.
"These are reports of the increasing resistance and defiance of our foes," he said, his voice carrying to the uppermost reaches of the chamber. "See how many of them there are?"
He waved a hand. "Some of our citizens slain by the villainous, deluded followers of the discredited High Imperceptor; unfair and trumped-up fees and taxes on our merchants by no less than seven cities of the Moonsea and Dragonreach; and open warfare made upon our soldiers and caravans by the brigands who style themselves The Cult of the Dragon. Is this not monstrous? Should we not look to sharpening our swords and readying our spells?"
"No," someone replied flatly from the middle benches, and there was a murmur of laughter. Manshoon let it run its course and die away, then added almost gently, "But there's more. Much more. The survival of our very city is at stake!"
"It always has been," someone called. "Aye—show us something new, to back up those old words!"
That last speaker was one of Fzoul's priests, speaking as he'd been ordered to. Manshoon smiled tightly and replied, "Very well. Look, all! Look well!"
He waved a hand and stepped back, and the central well in which he stood darkened slightly. Motes of light winked and sparkled, and suddenly the image of a robed, sneering man stood in the open space, one hand raised in an intricate

gesture. A soundless bolt of lightning lashed out from that hand, leaping into the upper benches, whose occupants were gaping up at the images of other men—three Zhentarim, known by sight to them all—that had suddenly appeared atop the benches and were hurling spells of their own.

The silent images of crackling, crawling magic flashed and leaped through the air; Manshoon stood calmly in the midst of the flashing tumult and said, "Behold! A Red Wizard of Thay!" He looked around at the dumbfounded Councilors and added, "Confronted, as you can see, in this very chamber, two nights ago!"

Silent spells splashed, grappled, then died away. They all saw green flames race up and down the limbs of the struggling Red Wizard—if it was a Red Wizard—saw the man's flesh dissolve in that conflagration until only black, writhing bones remained, then saw those bones collapse into ash.

In the hushed silence that followed, Manshoon's voice carried clearly. "Saw you the scroll at his belt?" The image of smoking ashes faded away even as he gestured to it, but many of the Councilors nodded. "To my sorrow, I recognized it, and checked the records chamber of this Hall. The naval nonaggression treaty recently completed with Thay is missing. We are left defenseless against Thayan piracy—but with the concessions we surrendered to get that agreement still lost to us."

Manshoon raised his arms and his voice as one as he turned to look around the chamber. "And this was but a piece of naDer! What if this wizard had come for vour monev? Or your throat? Or your children, to sell them into slavery?"

There was an excited, angry buzz of comment as Councilor looked to Councilor. Manshoon let it grow for a time then waved for silence and went on. "Zhentil Keep needs strong guardians against such perils. You saw the bravery and skill of three Zhentarim here with your own eyes, preventing

destruction of this place—or worse. I can keep this city safe with more stalwart, loyal mages such as these ... but I need your permission! I must have the right and the power to defend you."

Manshoon turned on his heel to look around at them all again, speaking more quietly. "I need the might to govern in the face of such cruel and energetic foes. I must be free to train and equip forces to properly defend our city, and have the authority to whelm and direct them in emergencies! I move that the formal powers of the First Lord of Zhentil Keep be so increased."

The chamber erupted. Everyone was on his feet, shouting. Red-faced nobles pounded gnarled, white-haired old fists on their benches and bellowed, "Never!"

There were shouts of "Tyranny!" and others of "Well said!" and "Shame!"

There were also cries of "Let the Lord speak!" and "Wisdom at last!"

From somewhere in the upper benches came the wink and flash of a dagger, spinning end-over-end through the air toward Manshoon.

He watched it come, calmly, then raised his hand and—at the last instant, after most of the Councilors had seen it and fallen into shocked silence—disintegrated it with a wave of his hand and a muttered word. It became a small shower of sparks, then was gone.

In the silence that followed Fzoul Chembryl, High Priest of the Black Altar, stood and in a loud, level voice said, "From such chaos and strife can come only harm. Whatever is decided here, we must have order in this city, and the rule of law." He let his words fall into the silence, for emphasis, then went on. "We have heard a proposal that has caused some controversy—and seen the clear urgency behind that proposal. Let us now have order, and put this matter to a vote forthwith. Let this Council decide—now!"

There was a hubbub of excited talk. One old nobleman said

loudly, "Matters of such import should never be decided in haste! This is not well done! This Council never speaks or acts hastily!"
High Priest Fzoul answered coolly, "Daggers are never thrown in this Council chamber, either." Then he folded his robes around himself in dignity and sat down.
There was more excited talk, then a young noble rose and said, "Let us have a vote. Something must be done, or we are all wasting our time here!"
There were supportive cries of "A vote! A vote!" Most of them seemed to come from the benches where the Zhentarim sat.
Manshoon looked around the chamber calmly and said, "A vote has been called. Will any other Councilor speak for it?"
"I speak for it!" cried an excited young noble from the uppermost benches. There were hisses, but Manshoon raised his hand in triumph and said quietly, "A vote has been twice called, and the duty of this Council is clear. Let us vote."
Fzoul stood up again. "By rule, the call is mine, yet I think it not right for the servants of holy Bane to act in the secular business of Zhentil Keep. If Councilor Urathyl will do the honors?"
The young noble who'd seconded the call stood, flushed with pride, and called, "The First Lord asks this Council to increase his powers, and those of the Zhentarim he commands. Who stands in support of this request?"
Here and there around the chamber, a Councilor silently came to his feet. There were not many, and Councilor Urathyl counted them twice, himself among their number. Then he called the count—twenty-and-one—to Fzoul, who confirmed it.
Less happily, the young noble drew breath and said, "Let all who stand against the request stand to be counted!"
Chairs scraped and echoed all over the chamber, and many Councilors stood. Forty-six, Urathyl counted, and
called it out. Fzoul bowed, and said with dignity, "The count

is correct and has Bane's blessing. The request is den—"
"Wait!" The sour but strong voice of Lord Phandymm cut across the High Priest's words. Fzoul bowed to him, indicated surrender of the floor with a wave, and sat down.
The senior noble, known to most as a loud opponent of the Zhentarim, struggled to his feet. He was trembling, and his expression seemed to slip several times as his hands clutched at the bench before him for support. "I—I think we are too hasty, and have voted with our hearts, thinking too little of the safety of fair Zhentil Keep. It irks many of us—myself among them—" Phandymm's eyes grew wild, and he gabbled for a moment before his voice cleared, and he went on, "Irks us, I say, to see one so young making what some would see . as an arrogant and dangerous grab for the scepter of absolute rule over our city. And yet. . . and yet, if we set aside our anger, what he proposes is only sensible! Have we not seen the perils that lurk in the shadows of this very Hall? Have w-w-weee—?"
The man's expression slipped and struggled again, and his body jerked about, as if plucked at by unseen hands. "Magic," a Councilor muttered. "Someone's using magic on Phandymm!"
"Magic!"
"Aye, foul magic!"
One of the Zhentarim wizards got to his feet and said, "Lord Phandymm seems in some emotional distress, but his deep feelings for the safety of our city are clear, and from the height of a measure of years greater than most of us, he has called for a revote. I move that the revote proceed!"
Councilor Urathyl almost fell over his feet rising to shout, "I speak in support!"
Fzoul stood up again. "A revote must now occur."
Lord Chess had been watching Manshoon, who sat silently in his front bench seat, smiling a little, his gaze never leaving the face of the sweating, gabbling Lord Phandymm. Lord Chess watched a little glow leap in the mage's eyes, and was

sure.
Then he was on his feet, snarling. "Enough. Manshoon!
And all of you Zhentarim! Let all foul magic be left outside the chamber, so the wise Councilors of Zhentil Keep can deliberate here with clear wits!"
Manshoon turned a gaze that burned from Phandymm— who collapsed, senseless, into his seat—onto Chess, who felt its sudden weight and power tearing at his mind. He gasped, then roared in rage as he felt his tongue thicken and words come unbidden into his head.
The First Lord smiled at him. Chess struggled, tried to sit down, then amid rising desperation brought his arm up, as if from a great distance, and stared at the ring that gleamed, golden, on his finger.
There were shouts and gasps as the air over the central well of the High Hall swirled with sudden golden radiance, drifting and spinning, ever-brighter, and the dumbfounded Councilors saw a large black dragon fade into being in the center of the chamber.
Its wings beat once, the wind smashing many Councilors flat against the benches behind them, and its hiss was loud and terrible. Acid foamed and bubbled at the edges of its mighty jaws, and the chamber was full of the eye-watering stink of its breath.
Some of the Councilors were screaming as the dragon turned its head, a terrible hunger and mirth in its eyes, to look around at them all. Its wings swept up lazily once more. Its tail casually smashed a Councilor to pulp amid the splinters of the bench where he'd sat moments before.
Then the tall windows of the Hall shattered with the sound of angry thunder, and nightmare came to the Council.
Three spherical monsters hung silhouetted against the bright light of day. Eyestalks writhed and swung about them, and they laughed coldly.
"Beholders!"
"The rumors were true! The Zhentarim are in league with

beholders!"
Then Councilors were screaming and scrambling all over the chamber in a general rush to flee. The dragon roared and spat a smoking, sparkling plume of acid at the foremost beholder, but the air was suddenly full of rays of magical light erupting from their many orbs, rending the magical shields that hung over this central chamber of the Hall. Cowering under his bench, Lord Chess was shocked to see Zhentarim mages stand up in their seats with triumphant sneers on their faces, boldly ignoring the dragon lashing the air so close overhead to hurl handballs of fire and bolts of lightning at some of the most proud and powerful noble Councilors.
Various of those Lords snatched out magical rods and wands of their own, striking back with snarls of fury. Overhead, the dragon roared deafeningly in pain. Smoking wounds were appearing all over its body, opening here and there with terrible speed to rain down blood on the men fighting in the benches. Swords and knives flashed in the growing gloom as men grappled with each other in the tiers of benches. Chess drew his own slim ceremonial sword and rose up from behind his bench as a mage hurried by. Coolly, he ran the man through.
The wizard coughed, convulsed, then hung heavily on the Lord's blade. With some difficulty, he slid it free and turned in time to see the still-roaring dragon fade away, enveloped in the magics of the eye tyrants who hung over the central well of the chamber. With a last echoing rumble, it was gone.
Chess saw something more, too—Zhentarim wizards had reached every visible door out of the chamber and stood blocking passage there, using magic to hurl back their fearful fellow Councilors, preventing any more from leaving.
More spells were snatching swords from hands all over the chamber, or making the steel burn as if in a furnace. Chess saw a man swear and snatch his hand away from his sword, letting it clang to the benches. Then his own blade seemed

to catch fire.
He let it fall and dived back beneath his bench. Peering out from under it, through a mist of pain, Chess saw Manshoon gloating openly, his smile wide as he looked around him at the ruin, the moaning men, and the three menacing beholders.
Then the First Lord's triumphant sneer slid into a look of astonishment. Overhead, the largest beholder had turned stealthily. Rays had lashed out from its eyestalks to rend its two fellows.
One burst apart, spattering the stunned priests and Zhentarim mages below with its gore. The other spun through the air, blazing and torn apart, to crash down in ruin atop a group of wizards, crushing them to screaming pulp.
The lone remaining beholder floated slowly across the chamber. Manshoon hurled a spell at it, but the death he sent was repulsed. Lord Chess cowered under his bench as the dark, awesome bulk halted just above him, eyestalks swiveling.
"Enough lawless killing," it hissed in a deep and terrible voice that left the Hall in sudden silence. "Let order be restored. All magic shall cease, or I shall slay those who launch it. Let all Councilors who are able to do so return to their seats. That means all, Manshoon."
The First Lord of Zhentil Keep paused in the midst of frantic spellcasting, hastily-erected defensive spells flashing and glowing around him as his hands faltered, and cast a glare up at the eye tyrant in which hatred and fear warred with each other—and fear won. For now.
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The second vote, with the beholder hanging dark and menacing above the thoroughly terrified Councilors, was not . even close. The First Lord's requested special powers were denied and, at the bidding of the eye tyrant, Lord Chess was named Watchlord of the Council—his own vote stripped from him along with all power to order about any armed man of

Zhentil Keep, but his will in establishing the business of the Council made supreme, to stop anyone from overthrowing the Council and establishing sole rule over the city. Even ambitious archmages.

More than a few eyes in that chamber saw that the face of the supposedly impartial High Priest of Bane was white with anger. There was a general hiss of fury at his deceit when Manshoon strode around the ring of benches to lean over him and murmur a few words. The price of the uncloaking was high, but the words needed to be said.

"Make no defiance," Manshoon breathed, his face a calm mask. "This is good for the stability of the city. I was close with Chess once, and can be again—enough, at least, to make him move at our bidding."

Whatever reply Fzoul might have made, eyes still dark and ugly with rage, was lost in the cold, hissing tones of the beholder, who had descended to hang close above the two men.

"It is hoped among my kind," the eye tyrant said with deep sarcasm, "that the events of today have taught you both the folly of villainy, and how those who deal in evil ways are changed by their own dealing, and not for the better. The violence you chose to employ should have made your lesson as clear and as painful for you both as it has been to the rest of this Council, not least those who've died this day." The beholder began to rise, its eyestalks still trained in a deadly array upon the two men, and added almost bitterly, "But the curse of humans seems to be the nimbleness with which they forget."

Manshoon straightened, opening his mouth. His expression foretold words of proud defiance, but the beholder drifted straight toward the shattered window it had burst in by at his bidding, such a short time ago. As it disappeared from view, it roared its parting words loudly enough that they echoed about the Hall. "Behave yourself with rather more subtlety in future, Manshoon, if you expect to continue to

enjoy our support!"
The Councilors, frozen in their seats in fear of what the First Lord might do in his rage, watched in silence as Manshoon stared up at the window, face composed, for what seemed a very long time. Then he smiled thinly, raised one hand in what might have been a salute—or a wave of dismissal—and quietly turned and walked out of the Hall. Wordlessly, the surviving Zhentarim rose from their benches and followed him, their dark cloaks sweeping out like the moving backs of so many determined, marching ants.
Lord Chess watched them go and finally let out a shaky breath that he'd been holding for a long time. As he rose, found his now-cool blade, and made his own way out, he was careful not to look over at where Fzoul Chembryl still sat.
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There was awe and terror in the streets of Zhentil Keep when a beholder of gigantic size drifted, dark and silent, over the rooftops of the city in the brightness of highsun. It ignored the screaming, scrambling folk below, and threaded its way between spires and high turrets across the city. Its deliberate route took it at last into the clustered towers of a high, grand stone castle, where it paused by a certain window.
Then its spherical body erupted into a puff of smoke, the panes of that window were drawn open by an invisible force, and a robed, bearded man stepped out of the heart of that smoke onto the sill of the window—and in. Behind him, the smoke fell away from the window and drifted away, fading into nothingness.
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It had been a long wait, and Lord Amandon was breathing raggedly as the high window of his bedchamber squealed open and the chill northern breeze came in. The surface of his scrying-crystal misted over in an instant.
Etreth was already starting forward, his own sword ready in his hand, as the white-bearded old man with the challenging gaze stepped through the window and strode down empty

air. "Well met, Rorst Amandon," he said in a voice that managed to be both dry and deep at the same time.
"Welcome, Elminster," the old lord managed to gasp.
Etreth came to a. halt, open-mouthed, then seemed to remember that he held a sword. Elminster looked at him with a smile and said, "Put that toy away," in tones that were not unkindly.
"I've—not time left to waste words," Lord Amandon gasped, struggling to speak clearly. "That was well done, Lord Mage. My thanks. I'm glad I lived to see it."
Elminster bowed. "It was good ye did—and I'm sure ye appreciated what I did for Zhentil Keep more than either Manshoon or Fzoul."
Rorst managed a smile as Etreth stared from one of them to the other, mouth still open, sword forgotten in his hand. "I did not want Manshoon dead, whatever he may have done to me," the old lord said, eyes on Elminster's. "Zhentil Keep needs a strong leader, to hold it against its growing foes, but I did want him held back from becoming a tyrant over a fortress-city." His breath faltered. "Even evil men can be useful."
"Aye," Elminster said, watching him with something rather like sadness in his eyes. "I salute ye, Lord. It has been an honor to do battle against ye, all these years."
Lord Amandon bowed his head, where he lay propped against his pillows, and said faintly, "And now I fear it is ended, Elminster. Farewell, Etreth. My thanks—and all my wealth—is yours." He turned his head from smiling into the eyes of his servant one last time, to sweep his gaze across his broadsword to the portrait of Lady Amandon. Elminster's eyes followed his.
Through welling tears Etreth saw the white-bearded mage lift a hand and murmur some words, his face very gentle.
A moment later, the face in the painting seemed to turn, see her lord, and smile. Then she was stepping forward, a figure outlined in faint white fire, face radiant with welcome, as she

extended welcoming arms to her lord.
"Desil," Lord Rorst quavered, tears in his own voice. "Oh, Desil!" He raised his wasted arms with surprising speed, reaching for her.
As she came to him, the old noble struggled up from the bed to meet her—and fell headlong, crumpling to the carpets without a sound.
The radiant figure hung above him for a moment, looking down with a smile, then faded away. Etreth made a convulsive movement toward his lord, then checked and looked up at Elminster. Both men knew Lord Amandon was dead.
"Lady Amandon," Etreth said, weeping. "Oh, the gods are merciful!" Then he froze, brushed aside tears with one gnarled, impatient hand, and turned to look up at Elminster.
"Nay," he said slowly," 'twas thou who conjured her up. Why, lord? Why help one who's stood against you—a longtime foe?"
Elminster replied, "Even evil men can be useful. Your lord was useful to me as well as to his city—and as we old men know, if long years are to be ours, debts must be paid."
He turned toward the window and Etreth saw that his hands were shaking with weariness. One of those hands rose to salute the faithful servant as the Old Mage gained the windowsill, squared his shoulders, and turned back to face him. Elminster smiled and added softly, "No matter how high the price."
Introduction
ONE COMES, UNHERALDED, _ TO ZIRTA
Welcome to the very first tale of the Forgotten Realms® setting.
Penned in 1967, before my eighth birthday, it's a trifle slower, more static, and heavier on the dialogue than it might be if I wrote the same scenes today—but it stands up, I think, remarkably well.
It also fits the mold of many Dungeons & Dragons

adventures (a game whose creation was then some seven years in the future) rather neatly: It begins in a tavern, or more precisely, with a tavern brawl.

It also features the first appearances of no less than six rather famous (some might prefer the term "notorious") Realms characters. Zirta, by the way, has been swallowed up by Scornubel; it was then the name given to the cluster of settlements on the south bank of the River Chionthar.

So travel down the steps of a dimly lit drinking house called The Banshee Laid Bare on 4 Elesias in the Year of the Weeping Moon (1339DR), and watch the fun.

After all, this, my friends, is where the fun all started.

ONE COMES, UNHERALDED, _TO ZIRTA

Now in all the lands 'twixt bustling Waterdeep and the sparkling waves of the Sea of Fallen Stars, no men were more loved—and feared—than the stoic swordsman Durnan, the blustering old rogue Mirt, and the all-wise, ancient wizard Elminster.

Wherefore all conversation in The Banshee Laid Bare came to a sudden, startled halt when the puffing man lurching down the steps into the flickering, none-too-well candlelit gloom of the taproom snarled back over his shoulder, "Write it down yourself, man! Mirt the Moneylender is no man's lackey!"

More than one head turned oh-so-casually to look at the gasping, pendulous-bellied arrival in his flopping, battered old swash-boots, and more than one eyebrow lifted as its owner quelled a sneer. This was the Old Wolf of Waterdeep? The man even that

coldly gliding, sinister elf men called the Serpent feared to cross?

Mirt the Merciless, if it truly was he, drew himself up like the prow of a weary ship sliding into dock—a stout old cog splitting its seams, by the look of him—and peered around.

Espying an empty table with a little sigh of satisfaction, he made for it, and had scarce settled himself with a groan of

contentment onto a bench whose answering groan was rather more heartfelt when a bald-headed, beak-nosed man at the next table wheeled around in his seat.

"That," he announced with soft menace, "is my table, see? I likes it always empty, to give standing room for m'empty tankards. So move thy lard, hog-head!"

Mirt gave no sign of having heard the man, and with a grunt of effort levered one of his muddy-booted feet up onto the tabletop with a crash. "Ho, wench!" he called. "I thirst!"

The bald man blinked, glared at the fat man who was now studying the toe of his raised boot with a critical air, and growled, "I'm speaking at ye, boar-belly!"

Mirt studied his nails, let his gaze wander casually in the bald man's direction, nodded an affable wordless greeting, and looked down the room at the other drinkers, most of whom were now hunched forward in glitter-eyed anticipation.

Mirt gave them all that vague, easy-going smile of greeting, and called, "Ho! Ale, by Tempus Stormhelm! A keg at least!"

With a rising growl of anger the bald man rose to stand over the fat merchant, revealing shoulders as broad as a small wagon and bared arms bulging with muscles a-crawl with green veins. Hands like shovels reached forward as Mirt watched with what seemed like mild interest, and closed with cruel force on the merchant's leg, at ankle and knee.

"Ye seem hard of hearing, lardpot," their owner snarled, the rough humor gone from his eyes now, despite the snickers and snorts rising in chorus from the bravos around the table where he'd been sitting. "I wonder if that'll continue when ye make close acquaintance with pain, swift and soon!"

Mirt blinked at the man, let his gaze drop to the hand on
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lifted his head to almost brush noses with the angry face thrust close to his—and belched, long and thunderously, in the man's face.

With a roar of rage the man hauled hard on the merchant's leg, pulling the moneylender into the air, table and all (thanks to Mirt's other arm and leg, which maintained their holds thereon). As the table creaked upright onto its end, the merchant drove one fat fist hard into his newfound foe's throat. The bald head whipped around with a sickening gurgle.

Mirt planted his other hand on that face and sprang free as the man slid to the floor in a boneless wobble, and the table crashed over atop him. The Old Wolf's vault ended atop the next table with a tankard-rattling crash, hurling spatterings of drink and spitting, swearing men—the bald man's drinking brothers—in all directions.

With a general roar of startled or delighted oaths and a flashing and ringing of dozens of blades leaping out of their scabbards, the taproom erupted. Mirt kicked out, hard, at the one man at that table who had a pillar behind him. He heard that unfortunate's skull thump off it, deep and damp, then sprang the other way, atop another man whom he bore to the floor, stabbing viciously with a foot-long dagger that had somehow appeared in his hand. They bounced, then the man under the fat merchant lay still.

Swords clanged on swords, men shouted challenges and snarled intentions to rekindle old or imagined grudges, and someone threw a chair.

On the stairs a hastening serving wench screamed and dropped her wineskin, only to have it deftly plucked from the air inches from where it would have split on the rough, sand-strewn floor by a long, tanned arm whose owner said, from somewhere behind her ankles, "My thanks, lass. Now take thy wailing up to the sun again, there's a good maid, and give me room!"

Wild-eyed and as swiftly as a startled falcon a-wing, she complied, leaving the man with the wineskin to unstopper it and sample appreciatively of what sloshed therein. He promptly made a face, put the stopper back, and set the

skin down on the steps beside him.
In the tumult of battle, with chairs crashing over and the corners of tables being shoved into the bellies of enthusiastically-cursing men, no one heard his cheerful utterance. But when the newcomer plucked up the nearest table and hurled it the length of the taproom to crash in splintered ruin against a pillar and the shrieking bodies of a dozen frantically struggling men, general notice was taken of this second arrival.
"B'yr Lady of the Moon!" one man gasped into the second sudden silence to befall the taproom that evening. Men stared—and gaped—and froze.
Standing on the bottom step smiling a small, catlike smile and looking around the room with the promise of death awake and eager in his eyes was a man who wore leather breeches, boots, and a vest that left his chest and arms bare. An outlander, for sure. His flesh was tanned the hue of honeyed wood, and the muscles rippling beneath it made him look like a great hunting cat as he stared around the room. He twisted his lips into something that was part sneer and part eager smile.
"Ye might have waited until I was done wenching my way through our room-taking, Old Wolf!" he said in mock-complaint. "I've been so deprived on our journey thus far!"
"Six necks wrung and four men slit open from vitals to throat?" Mirt replied, puffing his way forward with someone else's blood all over his hands. "That's deprived? Well, now. Aye, I suppose 'tis, for ye." He frowned and looked back over his shoulder, brightening in an instant.
"Well, look ye!" he said, jerking his head hard enough to make his brustling moustaches quiver. "I've saved ye some, Durn—most of'em, strike me!"
"Durnan!" a man gasped somewhere down the room. "Durnan of Waterdeep!"
"DurnanK' another man took up the cry, his voice almost a sob of fear.

"Well, so ye have," Durnan observed delightedly, as if no one had gasped his name, and those long, corded arms cfraHhpH nut liIta cnpprlino armwe cnatfJipH nr» vnr\tht*r massive table as if it were a lady's cap-feather, and hurled it down the room, too.

The crash that heralded the end of its brief flight was almost drowned out by the screams and terrified yells of men seeking to flee, almost claw-climbing over each other in their scrabbling haste to reach the unlit, narrow servants' stair in the farthest back corner of the taproom.

For the space of a breath or two, the room was a-stream with wailing men. Then it was empty and quiet again, save for the pair of large and softly chuckling friends.

"Well, well," Durnan said, striding forward as smoothly as any panther, "it seems ye still can't do something as simple as order a little throatslake without starting a bloodletting brawl!"

"My reputation," Mirt replied with simple dignity, drawing himself up, "precedes me."

He looked around as a sudden thought struck him. "I wonder if someone left drink behind that didn't get spilled, hey?"

Durnan looked up at the rafters. "O watching gods," he said fervently," 'twould be overly kind of thee, I grant, if..."

"Hey!" Mirt rumbled in sudden delight. "Look ye!"

Three forms were huddled at a table in one of the darkest corners of the room, without benefit of candle or lamp, and there were decanters among them, and tallglasses, and slender, elegant hands wrapped around fluted glass...

"Ho!" Mirt roared happily. "Wenches! And all for us!"

Three long-tressed heads turned to regard him, their expressions impossible to discern in the gloom—but the testy male voice that came from their midst was flatly unmistakable in its sentiments: "I think not."

Mirt's eyes narrowed as he stalked forward. "I've heard yon tongue before... who are ye?"

The wench in the middle—the one with smoky eyes and the

frankly incredible bosom emblazoned with a bright tattoo of a dragon snaking its lucky way down out of sight—seemed to melt and waver for a moment before the Old Wolfs eyes. When its shimmer was done, he was looking at a gaunt, white-bearded old man in a battered Dointed hat and tattered robes.

"Men generally call me Elminster," the wizard said sourly over the rim of his raised glass, "if they dare to call me anything at all."

He made a gesture with the glass, as if toasting the two warriors, and Durnan let his hands fall away from the hilts of the daggers strapped to the insides of his bracers, and breathed once more.

Mirt chuckled uneasily. "And the wenches? Are they with thee?"

"So it seems," one of the women pressed against the Old Mage of Shadowdale purred, in the instant before her overpainted face whirled and spun—and became a darkly-smiling thing of beauty framed by long silver hair that stirred lazily around her shoulders like the tentacles of a restless octopus. "But why don't you see if you can win us free, valiant moneylender?"

"Storm!" Mirt gasped roughly. "Storm Silverhand!"

Durnan looked at the lass pressed against Elminster's other shoulder, and asked lightly, "And you are—?"

The whirl was momentary this time, and the eyes that looked back at him were a trifle more demure, but the hair was silver, again, and stirring as if dancing in a breeze that was not there.

"Men generally call me Alustriel," she said, teasing Elminster with a look, "when they find their lips free long enough to call me anything at all."

"Gods above!" Mirt swore, as three glasses were raised in his direction. "What're the three of ye doing down here?"

"Well, we were listening to some very interesting converse," Storm said severely, "before your ah, valiant arrival. A little

slaving, a little fell magic, plots of a regicide or two; this is a slightly better tavern than most for the sort of entertainment we crave."
A smile had been playing about the corners of Durnan's mouth for some little time now, and it widened as he asked smoothly, "If I share the cost of that wine, may I also share a glass or two?"
"Ye may," Elminster grunted. "Our work here in Zirta is done for now."
Mirt frowned, lifting one bristling brow in bewilderment. "Tis?"
"Aye, so." The Old Mage pointed across the taproom. His long forefinger was indicating a corpse lying half-crushed under the splintered ruin of a table. "Look ye."
The outflung arm of the body ended in a hand that glistened with scales. Two of its fingers had lengthened into cruel, hooked talons and the blood running out across the floor from between them was a vivid blue.
"Ye might think on this," Elminster said pointedly, pushing a decanter across the table to Mirt, "when next ye bluster and swagger into a tavern, or a town. How much evil—or daring gallantry, or tight-fisted dealing—could be done by one who comes unheralded into Zirta, hmm?"
Storm whirled and spun and became a lushly-painted tavern dancer again, her bosom clad only in a sparkling sheen of false gems, and her earrings dangling beside her black, blossoming lips like fist-sized black stars. "Or two?" she asked.
Alustriel's whirlwind was almost too fleeting to see, but left her long, bared flank displaying lurid tattoos as she let her cloak fall away to display an almost burly body, with quite a different pert face, eyes that challenged—one encircled with a painted-on glow-ring—and an old sword-scar puckering her lips and chin permanently. "Or three?" she asked, eyes on Mirt's.
Mirt shook his head as if to clear it with what might have

been a wince, and, somewhat reluctantly, looked down from the show to peer at the dead taloned hand. "How many of these d'ye think're walking around Zirta right now?"
Elminster shrugged. "Why don't ye come with us and see?"
Mirt looked at Durnan, who looked at the Old Mage as he made a shrug of his own. "Why don't we?" the tanned swordsman replied, reaching for a decanter.
It was halfway to his lips when a slight sound from the stairs behind him made the warrior whirl around, tensed.
A woman was standing alone on the steps, a cloak drawn tirfit around her. eves eleamine almost merrilv down at them all through a full mask. Durnan's hand stole toward his sword hilt.
"That won't be necessary," Elminster said gravely, lifting a finger. As some sort of spell went singing up the stairs in a cloud that sought out every corner of the taproom, he added gently, "Be welcome, your Majesty."
"Why, thank you, Old Mage," the masked figure replied, throwing open her cloak and doffing her mask to let golden tresses spill forth amid Mirt's rumbled oath of amazement.
"May I present Queen Filfaeril of Cormyr?" the wizard added, gesturing grandly. Mirt and Durnan stared at the Purple Dragon glistening in amethysts on a breast softly draped in cloth-of-gold.
"Gods strike me!" Mirt roared. "What'reye doing here?"
The Queen of Cormyr shrugged as she deftly took the decanter from his hand and lifted it to peer at the contents within. "It seemed the right thing to do," she told it lightly, turning it in her grasp critically. "If one desires guidance, or forewarning of plots against a throne, or intelligent converse on the whys and morrows of the world, well... one comes, unheralded, to Zirta."
Mirt shook his head. "When I was younger," he complained to the gods who once again had failed to strike him down, "the world was much simpler."
Elminster sighed. "I fear that's a common experience," he

told the Old Wolf. "Ye seem to have lost thy decanter. Here, have another."

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Beldrim Taruster worked long, hard days in the dust of the warehouse yard, staggering under the weight of sacks heavier than he was and casks no man should be asked to lift. One slip, and he'd have pain for the rest of his days and no more coins with which to fill his belly, as he'd sit sourly watching a younger man staggering under the casks.

Such dark thoughts rode his shoulders like a heavy cloak, and at the stumbling end of a weary shift he was wont to eo to the Banshee, and down the dark stairs into the welcoming gloom of the taproom and his favorite firewine.

It beckoned this day—and if men gave him odd looks as he trudged up to the doors, well... he was used to that.

On the threshold Beldrim coughed, spat, and then slowly set his feet on the dark stair down. They were uneven in pacing, just the thing to make tired feet trip, and then he'd be—

Magic sang briefly around and within him, and his pace faltered. Things happened to men who strode into any embrace with magic.

Yet he was still alive and felt no pain. This might just be...

Beldrim took another step, very slowly. The light around him changed and the deafening silence gave way to voices. Amused folk—not many—talking together.

He stiffened, listening, and froze, taking firm hold of the rail.

Aye, so. He'd heard a-right.

And when the great and powerful laugh, sometimes castles tremble, and death reaches out to gather in many, many folk. All too swiftly to flee from, too. 'Twould be best to be elsewhere, even more swiftly, and starting right now.

Quietly—as quietly as he knew how—Beldrim Taruster turned on the step and went back up the stair again, his going as unheralded as his coming.

Sometimes, in life, it's better that way.

Introduction

A DANCE IN STORM'S GARDEN

What follows is a whimsy. An afternoon's incident involving Storm Silverhand, her garden, the old rogue of a wizard who seems to worm his way into all too many Realms tales (Elminster, of course; no prizes for that guess), and... someone less familiar.

There is also a fair bit of magely gloating, some of it on the part of Elminster. This is a topic Volo (the only Faerunian besides Elminster who seems to swiftly find something to say about anything) once commented upon, thus: "Elminster's probably the only man in all Faerun who can make his having a nap sound like ailecisive act of Realms-shaking importance. Then again, he's one of the few men whose sleeping habits are of Realms-shaking importance. If he woke up grouchy of mornings there'd probably be little left east of Shadowdale but a wild-magic waste, instead of Ravens Bluff and Mulmaster and Thay and... hmm. Perhaps the Realms needs someone heroic (or stupid) enough to steal the Old Mage's morning meal once or twice, at that."

So let us employ the magic of the taleteller to steal unseen into Storm's garden in Shadowdale on the lazy afternoon of the sixth day ofEleint, in the Year of the Bow (1354 DR), and see what befalls.

Volo had something else relevant to say about the attitudes of wizards, too: "Ever notice how wizards think all life in the Realms dances on their hands and lasts from day to day only because they work constantly to keep us all alive? How do they think we survive when they're in the bathroom?"

Ahem. The garden, as I recall, lies just this way...

A DANCE IN STORM'S GARDEN

I. The Sword

The sword falls from the sheath, bounces once, and in the air twists from its glimmer-shiver into a silver-furred cat. Which pounces upon a handy flagstone to crouch with its tail switching angrily and its green eyes gleaming fury out at the pleasant garden around it.

Those eyes have gazed upon much grander entrances and more welcoming and attentive audiences than this sun-dappled, bird-chirping corner of kitchen garden. Here a profusion of thalusks not yet ripened, and there a prace-bell vine winding its intricate, curlicued way up a post that had once been a Zhentilar horseman's lance. A thick brezick hedge behind, curving like encircling arms. No bowing servants, no hastening lackeys, not even—

Out of nothingness, and over the angry visitor, a spell falls with the tinkling of a thousand tiny, unseen bells.

"My, my," a gently amused voice observes from behind a rosebush. "First a long sword, then a cat. Do you truly mislike your own shape so much?"

The cat freezes—then spins around and up, rising with a speed and angry shrieking of air that terrifies birds, voles, and even stinging flies into frantic flight—into a tall, darkly menacing form that towers in the sudden silence.

Though the rosebush seems unimpressed, the cat has become a woman in a dark, tattered cloak over a gown of similar hue and condition. Her eyes remain two emerald flames, her brows dark and lowered in a snarl that betokens no good will toward talking rosebushes—nor what lurks behind them.

"I know not who you are, and care less," the former cat spits, "but the forms in which I choose to greet the world are my own business. As is the unfamiliar and puny spell you've so rudely dared to cast upon me—which I now break, thus. You may now beg me to spare your life, and tell me truly where I might find one Elminster of Shadow-dale, and I may—if you beg very prettily, abasing yourself utterly, and promising me all manner of rewards—let you live. Or not."

"Ah," the voice from behind the rosebush replies merrily, "then I suppose I must beg you to step into my kitchen and share some moonweather tea. Or not, of course."

II. The Rosebush

The dark-gowned woman hisses in rage and thrusts out one

arm as if hurling a generous handful of empty air at the unseen voice. Sparks swirl as blue gouts of flame stab forth from her palm, sizzling across sun-dappled air at the rosebush—only to shiver into fading blue flickerings that surge furiously out and back in all directions, spreading across empty air, flowing into oblivion, and leaving every rose petal and dark delicate leaf untouched.

The sorceress who spent so many months as a sword cries out, aghast, and weaves a quick warding about herself before snapping, "Who are you?"

"So politely asked, saith Storm Silverhand, who then makes so bold as to prettily beg the same of you: what name do you bear?"

"Silverhand? One of the Seven?"

"The same."

"By the banefire of—!" Fear is louder than fury in that hasty snarl, and its green-eyed, black-garbed owner does not add her name to it but instead casts another swift spell that makes her wink out of visibility—then, thrashing in real fear now, back into it, as if snatched up short by the thrumming sturdiness of a collar and stout chain.

"What cruel magic—?" This snarl is more of a shriek.

"Such an abundance of questions must weigh heavily," Storm Silverhand observes gently, as she glides around the rosebush to confront the wildly-struggling sorceress. "I know mine do."

Showing no outward signs of distress at her stated burden, she advances in patched and sweat-stained breeches, a cheerful wreck of a hat, and a dusty breast-scarf. Beneath are tall, lithe curves, and spilling out from beneath her hat, a wild splendor of thigh-length silver hair, tresses curling idly of their own volition, like lazy snakes.

She addresses her writhing visitor in calm tones. "I find myself wondering what manner of sorceress travels as a sword—a sword that plunges so abruptly from a sheath that appears within my wards without heralding, and departs

again as swiftly—then becomes a cat, before adopting the shape of a woman who spits enough hauteur and venom for any six rulers. I also find myself still wondering what name such a being might bear. Heavy weights, indeed."
"I... no! You'll slay me anyway, so why should I surrender my name and nature to you?"
Storm sighs at this bitterness, and tells the rosebush, "Pride is so frail an armor. D'you not think so?"
III. The Wizard
The rosebush shakes all over, curls a thorny tendril back as if to scratch at itself, straightens, and grows both more solid and more brown. Brown boots, brown breeches, and a brown belt and sword scabbard, complete with impressively heavy-looking sword. All worn by a tall, slender man whose long, flowing beard and almost as long hair are as white as unspoiled snow. Blue-gray eyes sparkle—with mischief?—under slightly dark brows. A curved, glossy brown pipe fades into view out of nothingness, to hover helpfully near the bearded mouth. Which promptly crooks up into a wry smile.
"Increasingly I find it so, aye... but then, I've had an age more than most spell-hurlers to learn that. This particular malicious sorceress is no worse than most."
He turns his head, lifts one eyebrow in a manner familiar to many Faerunians—most of them dead—and asks almost as gently as Storm frames her calm questions, "Think ye not so, Nathchanczia of Neverwinter?"
The struggling sorceress freezes once more, her face going bone-pale. Her bosom heaves with swift, fearful breaths, out of which emerges a query that is more gasp than snarl. "Y-you know my name?"
The white-bearded man draws himself erect, fixes her with a stern (yet still twinkling) gaze, and replies, "To try this pride of thine on like the cloak ye make of it: know, wench, that Elminster of Shadowdale knows many, many things. I tread the worlds, and see centuries pass, towers rise and castles fall, and yet retain my smile. I mate with dragons—suitably

shapechanged, of course—and live to rue that whim. I dance with liches who are bones or less, I hurl down fortresses when they stand in the way of a pleasant view, trade places with rosebushes at a lass's call, and even pay taxes with a smile. Truly, I am... a braggard and a dolt who's somehow managed to stay alive longer than most, by sheer luck more than any sly skill. Yes, Nathchanczia, I know thy name—as I know that of thy mother Alaice and thy father Rorold, and their parents before them, and . . .

but ye apprehend my drift. I even know why ye've come to Shadowdale seeking me, but 'twould amuse me to hear it from thy lips. With, as ye charge, appropriate begging. Or not, of course."

IV. The Trap

Nathchanczia's white face goes even more bloodless and her pretty throat works as she swallows, licks dry lips, swallows again, then whispers, "T-to kill you. I was sent to do so."

"Aye, and under the compulsion of?"

The sorceress shakes her head, tears glistening in her eyes. "I cannot say his name, or the spell he laid on me will slay me."

Elminster makes an airy gesture with one hand that accomplishes two ends: It causes Storm Silverhand to silently back away, her face grave, and his floating pipe to relocate itself smoothly by her shoulder. The air seems to prickle with expectation as the Old Mage smiles—in a teeth-baring, mirthless manner—and takes a step toward the trembling sorceress.

"So ye face the gentle choice: betray him and die, or defy me... and die. Ah, 'tis a hard road we who work magic must walk. Time and again we are forced to confront ourselves, and see what we are, and are becoming. Nathchanczia, who are ye?"

The woman in black stares at him like a small animal caught in a trap, shudders, closes her eyes, and weeps silently, hissing, "No... no... no."

"One who needs more courage in the face of death," Elminster observes gently. "Yet that's no rare failing. Let me release ye from the certainty of imminent demise, and tell thee that I'll myself name the bowman who aimed thee hither. His name would be: Aundaman of Thay."

The name echoes strangely as it falls from his lips, and a hush falls on the scene, flowing out across the garden like a chilling shadow.

Nathchanczia's eyes flash open, fixed on the Old Mage in sudden triumph, and from her unmoving breast bursts a sudden roaring magic, a ravening stream of hungry fury that slams into the white-bearded wizard and sweeps him away utterly, in a white searing that claws at the hedge beyond but is hurled back into curling, fading smokes by something unseen.

Yet its dread work is done, and as the searing spell dies the sorceress from Neverwinter smiles coldly at Storm Silverhand, gathers herself, and observes with cruel glee, "And so Elminster of Shadowdale is revealed as no more than an old fool at the end, out of sheer pride springing the trap the Red Wizard laid within me, to bring about his own doom!"

She raises one clawlike hand and adds with a sneer, "And so also shall pass the Bard of Shadowdale this day, at the hands of Nathchanczia of Neverwinter!"

V. The Pipe

Storm sighs and rolls exasperated eyes even before the blue flames lash forth, turning to complain to the hovering pipe, "Must they all sound like old Tintros the Minstrel lampooning Manshoon? Why is it always the Grand Gloat of Doom, hmm?"

And the pipe blows a smoke-ring at the sky, winks at Storm, winks again in a second flash of gold, and—is gone, leaving Elminster standing beside the Bard of Shadowdale, with his beard-cloaked chin about where the pipe was.

The Old Mage is shrugging and spreading empty hands. "Now, lass, ye must admit that the Grand Gloat of Doom is

fun. Pure cackling fun, with none of the heart-racing excitement of swift chases and blasting down castles and rending dragons with blastclaw spells! Why, we can indulge in gloats whilst reclining on thrones or willing partners, and sipping wine or knitting warm socks for coming winters! Deny Nathchanczia here not her gloat!"

Storm Silverhand looks at the once-more-trembling snrrprpss and savs rnldlv "Vipt shp shnw*»H hpr tntp hpart clearly enough when you gave her the chance. So, when she's done gloating—?"

Elminster smiles, waves a hand, and before she can so much as scream, Nathchanczia of Neverwinter is gone, and in her place crouches a stunted, peeved-looking gargoyle, old moss speckling its worn stone, its claws carved into an endless reaching for nothing at all.

"So, lass, how'd ye like another garden statue?"

The Bard of Shadowdale spreads long, capable fingers upon her hips and says crisply, "In someone else's very distant garden, thanks. If those you've already given me ever get loose all at once, most of the Dragonreach will be laid waste before the next nightfall!"

"True, true. Aundaman's garden, then?"

Storm's smile is slow, soft, and evil as she nods, turns away, and starts for the kitchen. "Moonweather tea?"

"Must I beg for it, love?"

She turns and nods, her smile still feral.

Elminster goes to his knees as the statue vanishes behind him, and pleads, "Can ye truly see no other way?"

The bard snorts, wrinkles her nose, and says, "Or not, of course. Even after a thousand-some years, your begging needs a lot of work."

Introduction

A SLOW DAY IN SKUIXPORT

Welcome to a romp. I'm guilty of writing many of these, and unashamed about that, too: they're more fun to write (and usually to read) than any number of so-called "serious"

literary tales.
This particular romp stars two of my favorite Realms characters: the adventuring duo of Mirt and Durnan.
Durnan? Well, Durnan is the thinking man's Conan. Doesn't say much, but (during the time this tale was written, at least) his strength still serves him well.
And what can one say of the fat, gruff, lovable Old Wolf of Waterdeep, Mirt the Moneylender, once a mercenary warcaptain known as "Mirt the Merciless?" Well, he was my very first Realms character. I was writing tales of his swindling and blustering his way through a series of roaring port cities along the Sword Coast before I quite hit upon the notion that there was a wider world around these cities, and that it had a name: the Forgotten Realms. To arrive at Mirt, take the spine of Glencannon, the rotund and
cheerfully (nay, heartily) dishonest bluster of Sir John Falstaff, and add a chaser ofPoul Anderson's character Nicholas van Rijn. I had the honor to meet Mr. Anderson once and ask his indulgence about Mirt, and he laughed and told me van Rijn had more than an echo of Falstaff in him (as seen through the Hanseatic League), too.
Toss these two into one of the most dangerous settlements in all the Realms—a "Star Wars Cantina," if you will, right underneath the rich and bustling city of Waterdeep—and watch the fun unfold.
This fun begins on the fifth day ofFlamerule, in the Year of the Prince (1357 DR), which just happens to be the same time the events chronicled in the later chapters of Spellfire were unfolding, half the Heartlands away. Those few days yielded a bumper crop of adventure. Perhaps the gods ofFaerun were bored and craved entertainment.
Volo sees such derring-do a little differently. As he once put it, "A lot of heroes seem to find time to reflect on the decisions they've made after they've gotten a lot of people killed. Wouldn't it be nice if they thought about the implications of their bold deeds and decisions before making

them?"

A SLOW DAY IN SKUIXPORT

Eyes blinked in the darkness, a prologue to a rare sound in Under mountain: a deep, grating chuckle. Xuzoun had not been this excited in a long, long time.

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In the damp, chill depths of the vast subterranean labyrinth that is the infamous killing-ground of Undermountain, in winding ways not all that far north of Skullport, a certain passage begins at an archway surmounted by a smiling, reclining stone nymph. The carving lacks the unearthly, deadly beauty of the real creature it represents, yet is still strikingly attractive, and word of it has spread over the years. Some folk even believe it represents a goddess—perhaps Sune, fire-haired
lady of love—and bow or pray before it... and who's to say they're wrong?

There's certainly more to the statue than its lifelike beauty. Everyone who has attempted to dislodge and carry it away has been found dead—in small, torn pieces—before the arch. A blood-stained chisel one of them let fall has been left behind as a mute warning to enthusiasts of portable sculpture who may happen upon the archway in the future.

Who carved it, and why, are secrets still held by the mysterious builders of this stretch of Undermountain. The careful—and lucky—adventurer can, however, learn what lies beyond the arch: a simple, smooth-walled passage can readily be seen—but for some reason, few walk far along it.

Those who do will find that the passage soon narrows, descends sharply, and becomes a rough tunnel hewn through damp rock, filled in several places by the ceaseless murmur of echoes: fading but never silent remnants of a distant cacophony seeming to involve loud speech in tongues not understood or identified by even the most careful listener.

As the intrigued traveler moves on, the grinning bones of

human adventurers and larger, snakelike things adorn the deepening way, and pits appear. Above several of these deadly shafts, palely shrouded in cobwebbed bones, hang dark, ancient tree trunks ending in sharp points. Years have passed since they fell like fangs to impale victims who are now mere twisted tangles of bone and sinew, dangling silently, their lifeblood spilled long ago.

Few explorers come so far. One may have to wait days for a crumbling bone to break free and fall into the depths with a small, dry sigh... and such sights are the only excitement hereabouts.

Any intruder who presses on past the area of pits—and manages to avoid personally discovering new ones—will soon meet the endless gaze of a skull taller than most men. A giant's head goggles down the passage, its empty sockets lit eerily by glowworms that dwell within. Their faint, slowly-ambulating radiances show what dealt death to the giant waiting in the dimness just beyond: a boulder almost as large as the riven skull, bristling with rusted metal spikes as long as most men stand tall. The bands that gird the stone and clasp its massive swing-chain are still strong. The many-spiked boulder hangs in the passage like a patient beholder, almost blocking the way, and sometimes swinging slightly in response to distant tremors and breezes of the depths.

Only a fool—or an adventurer—would come this far, or press on past the gigantic trap in search of further perils. A bold intruder who does will soon come to a place where a band of glowstone crosses the ceiling of the rough-hewn way, casting faint, endless ruby light down on an old, comfortable-looking armchair and footstool. These stout, welcoming pieces stand together in an alcove, flanked by a little side table littered with old and yellowed books—lurid tales of adventure, mostly, with a few tomes of the "lusty wizard" genre—and a bookmark made of a long lock of knotted and beribboned human hair.

A fortunate intruder will find the chair empty and wonder forever how it came to be there and who uses it. An unlucky explorer, or one rash enough to take or damage any of the items, will soon learn that it is one of the retreats of a certain old and mad wizard known as Halaster, called by some the Lord of Undermountain. Only he can call the ghostly ring of floating, skeletal liches that surround the chair fully into Faerun to hurl spells at those who offer him violence.

The fortunate visitor who found the alcove empty and lived to walk on would soon reach a stretch of passage where human bones drift and whirl endlessly, awaiting a living foe to rake and bludgeon. Bones circling with slow patience that stirs into deadly hunger whenever an intruder comes within reach.

Beyond the bonewhirl, the passage turns right and ends in a vast emptiness: A cavern large enough to hold some cities of the world above.

An emptiness where many eyes now blinked as a point of light winked into sudden life in the darkness.

The light pulsed, whirled in a frenzied dance, and grew swiftly larger, blazing up into a bright, floating .. . human woman, all long, silken hair; liquid grace; fine gown; and dark, darting eyes. The deep chuckle came again, and its source drifted close to the glowing phantom, peering at it with many eyes.

"Let us begin," a deep voice rumbled in tones of triumph, and a thing of dusty tentacles and flowing flesh rose almost wearily from the rocks of the cavern floor to approach the phantom.

As it came, its tentacles fell back into a melting bulk that rose up, thinned, and shaped itself with frightening speed into a twin of the phantom lady.

Above the glowing image and the shapeshifting thing, the many eyes watched critically as one strove to match the other ... many eyes on restless, snakelike stalks reaching from a floating sphere split by a broad, jagged mouth of

many teeth. The huge central orb of the sphere blazed with excitement, and a deep rumble of satisfaction rolled around the cavern.

Xuzoun was old even as beholders go, but to its kind there comes a time when the patience of long years and cold cunning runs out—and for Xuzoun, that time had come.

The eye tyrant drifted around its enthralled doppleganger with eager speed, looking for the slightest difference from the conjured image—and emitting another rumble of satisfaction when it found none. Motes of magelight swirled in its wake as it went, working mightier magics.

If all went well, this shapeshifting thrall that now looked . so beautiful and delicate—every inch a breathless, cultured, sheltered human noble maiden—would soon be wearing another shape: that of a certain Lord of Waterdeep. And thereby would Xuzoun, through eyes and shapeshifting hands unshakably linked to its will, reach at last into the World Above and the rich, bustling city of humans too stupid even to notice when they were being manipulated. Waterdeep, City of Splendors, where coins flowed in golden rivers and folk came from all over Faerun—and beyond—to dip their hands in the passing riches. And more: to taste and smell power, wielded with subtlety or brute force.

Power. To be a part of it all and shape ends and happenings to one's own desires. That was the lure Xuzoun could taste, even here in the hidden dark. With this thrall standing in the boots of the one called Durnan, master of the famous inn called the Yawning Portal, Xuzoun could readily convey items and beings between Skullport and Waterdeep (for stiff fees) as desired . . . and in a stroke become a channel for those flowing coins, and a part of all the darkest intrigues of the Sword Coast.

To live again, after so much skulking and waiting in the endless dark!

A long, cold time ago the Phaerimm had come and the city of Ooltul had fallen, dead beholders rent and hurled down its

labyrinthine passages in spellbursts until their gore-drenched husks choked the very avenues of the City of Tyrants. A city that had bent purple worms and illithids alike into mind-thralled guardians, cut new passages and chambers out of solid rock with melting ease, and casually slaughtered drow warbands and armies alike. The city of Xuzoun's birth.

The beholder could still scarce believe it had fallen, even after a slow eternity of fleeing across the lightless Underdark from the relentless Phaerimm, to come at last to fabled Skullport, the Source of Slaves, the most famous of the places Where the World Above Met the World Below. The place where Xuzoun had vowed it would stand, and run no more.

The eye tyrant looked again at its thrall and with an impatient thought blew the glowing image of the human maiden into a thousand dancing motes of magelight. They swirled in brief chaos then sped to the cavern walls to cling and glow palely there, shedding the radiance necessary for the next spell to work.

Aye, the next spell: the lure that would bring the doomed Lord of Waterdeep to Xuzoun. The old hero would come warily down into the depths of Undermountain to rescue a young, pretty noble lady in need: Nythyx Thunderstaff, the daughter of Durnan's old friend Anadul, who was brother to Baerom, head of the noble House of Thunderstaff. And here he would die.

The beholder looked at its doppleganger thrall, standing in the shape of Nythyx, and through the mind-link made it shrink back and put one delicate hand to its mouth in terror.

A perfect likeness; Xuzoun smiled. Soon Durnan would be within reach.

Aye, soon. If all went well. As things so seldom did when one had dealings with humans, Xuzoun thought wryly. Then it shrugged, eyestalks writhing like a nest of disturbed caterpillars, and a few magelights obediently rushed

together in front of it, swirled briefly, and became an eye—an eye that watched the fearful maiden as she spoke the words Xuzoun bid her to.
When the message was done, the beholder rumbled in satisfaction as the glowing eye circled it once before flying forth to find the human called Durnan.
Durnan the Lord of Waterdeep. Durnan the Master of the Portal. Durnan the Doomed.
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"And so our blades beyond compare—" Durnan sang, bending down to rummage in the bottom rungs of the rack. Selecting a bottle, he drew it forth.
"Did brightly flash through haunted air," he continued, and blew sharply on gray, furry dust that failed to whirl up from the bottle's label, but merely slid reluctantly sideways and fell away. Dantymer's Dew, 1336. Hmm. No Elixir of Evermeet, but not a bad vintage. Azoun of Cormyr had been crowned that year ... and who was to say he'd fared better than this wine?
Durnan ran his dust-sash along the bottle and set it in the silently floating basket at his elbow. What else had he—? Ah, yes: Best Belaerd! Urrh. Why folk liked black licorice whisky from far Sheirtalar was beyond him, but like it they did, in increasing numbers, too, and one must move with the times.
Huh. A golden dragonshower upon that. Lads scarce old enough to shave swaggering into his inn night after night with loud, arrogant voices and gleaming dazzleshine-treated swords they missed no chance to wave around and brag about their prowess with... Were we ever that crass when we were that young, that... unsubtle? I suppose.
Time is the great healer of hurts and lantern of favorable light; no doubt it was making his youth brighter in his eyes even as it made his back creak, these days, and his bones ache on damp days. They were aching now. Durnan hefted a brace of belaerd bottles into the basket and strode on, not bothering to look back to make sure it was following.

Of course it was. Old Engult cast proper spells, enchantments to last, not fade and die, as he'd done, old, crabbed, and feeble. They'd sung his spell-dirge not a tenday ago.

Durnan shook his head, ducked through a low arch into the next cellar, and defiantly resumed the old battle song. "And a dozen dragons I slew there!"

That bellowed chorus echoed back at him from half a dozen dim corners, and he grinned and put some hearty volume into the next line: "Six old ores and a medusa fair!"

The words brought memories to mind as the echoes rolled. This wasn't just the deepest wine cellar of the Yawning Portal; it was the home of many trophies of his swordswinging days. That lich periapt glimmering over there, where he'd hung it up as a lamp. This pair of ore tusks, from the only giant ore he'd ever met—well, if he'd lost that fight, 'twould've been the only giant ore he'd ever meet, wouldn't it?

And the swords of fallen foes, seized from lifeless, bloody hands on battlefields or carried off from spectre-haunted tombs and dragon-hoards. A score or more blades hanging here, there, and everywhere about him, the pale gleams of their slowly failing enchantments marking the walls of these dusty chambers and anchoring his expensive web of spell-wards.

Durnan looked around at them all, shook his head, and wondered how life had become so dull and routine. His thoughts leaped to blazing, pitching decks on ships that had sunk long ago, dragons erupting out of ruined castles now fallen and forgotten... the faces of snarling foes and welcoming ladies... and through it all, the bright flash and snarl of swords, skirling in a deadly dance he'd always won.

Absently Durnan hummed the rest of the ballad and began another battle song of his youth as he strode on. He'd forgotten just

how many old helms and blades and suchlike he'd stashed

and well-nigh forgotten down here.

Then, in front of him, his wards flared into brilliant life. The burly old tavernmaster hadn't even time to curse before those magical defenses failed in a flash and something bright burst out of a blazing gap in the suddenly-torn air, spitting deadly spell-energies in all directions and swooping at him.

Durnan ducked low, whipping out his belt-knife and snatching at the unseen basket behind him for a bottle to hurl. The glowing thing was small, round, and—splitting open to reveal a scene within itself. As it widened into a magical frame and glided to a smooth stop in the air in front of Durnan, the wards repaired themselves with a last fitful snarl of magical fire and peace returned to the cellar.

"Durnan? Lord Durnan?" The face of the lass in the sending was familiar, though he'd never heard that small, soft voice so a-tremble with fear before. Nythyx Thunderstaff was standing in a dark cavern somewhere, a smudge of dirt on her face and one bare shoulder gleaming above a torn gown —and her dark eyes were wide with terror.

"If this reaches you, please come to me. I'm in"—the noble maiden swallowed, bit her lip, and went on —"Undermountain. The others've all run off, and ... things are following me. I think I'm somewhere near your cellars, but I'm not sure ... and my glowfire is dying fast. Th-there's something following me. Please come."

The scene darkened and dwindled away to nothing, leaving Durnan staring at where those pleading eyes had been. The sending was genuine—it must be. Only certain nobles dared openly address him as "lord," and he'd seen Nythyx at a moonlit revel at the Palace not four days ago. It was truly the lass, all right, and she was scared. The cavern behind her might be anywhere in Undermountain except nearby; around the Portal, the dungeon he knew was all chambers and smooth-cut halls . . . and "the others have all run off" sounded like one of those daring forays by young noble boys

with a pressing need to impress ladies, a bright new sword or dashing cloak, and a few flagons of courage. Such forays seldom ventured more than a few rooms deep into the uppermost level of Undermountain's endless labyrinth before fear—or real danger—sent the hitherto-giggling participants hastening back to the city above.

So a little girl he'd laughed and played courtier-dolls with, and later talked of life, adventure, and escaping the boredom of being a dignified young lady of a great house—not all that different, at that, from the boredom of a retired adventurer— was lost and in distress somewhere in Undermountain. And he was the only aid she knew to turn to. Durnan sighed. His duty was clear.

Not that this was likely to rank with the daring deeds of his youth, but... the tavernmaster frowned and strode to a certain pillar. Now, was it the fourth stone down, or—?

The fourth stone held firm under his fingers, but the fifth stone obligingly ground inward, revealing a slot containing a lever. He pressed that finger of stone down. Something unseen squealed slightly, then clicked. Durnan remembered to step back before the stones, swinging out, dealt his knee a numbing blow. Then he glided forward again, feeling the old excitement leaping inside him, to peer into the dark revealed niche.

The quillons of a blade glimmered as if in greeting. Durnan took it out and slid it from its sheath—the long, heavy broadsword from a tomb in a frozen, nameless vale somewhere north of Silverymoon one desperate day when he'd been fleeing an ore band. He'd hewn his way across half the northlands with it, then from deck to pirate deck up and down the Sword Coast. There'd been a time when he could make a man's head leap from its shoulders with a solid swing. The muscles under his arm rippled just as they always had when he swung the blade, narrowly missing the basket hovering behind him.

It cut the air with that sinuous might he loved so well, but

seemed a lot heavier than it once had—gods, had he run around waving this all day and all night?—and Durnan brought its tip down to the floor, and leaned on it as he thought of where Nythyx might be... lost somewhere in the dark and dangerous ways beyond the walls of his cellars.

The tavernmaster fingered the familiar pommel and grip for a breath or two, then shrugged and did something to the plain ring on the middle finger of his left hand. A tiny pinwheel of silver star-motes arose to silently circle it, and he leaned over the rushing, swiftly-fading radiances and whispered, "Gone into Undermountain to rescue Nythyx Thunderstaff, old friend; I may need help."

The last motes died. Durnan looked at the ring, sighed, and hefted the sword again. His second sigh was louder, and he shook his head grimly at his failing strength as he hung the sword back in the pillar, and went down the room to where a shorter, lighter blade hung on the wall. This one had felt good in his hand, too...

It slid out of its sheath in swift, eager silence. He tossed it in the air, caught it, and instantly lunged at an imaginary opponent, springing up without pause to whirl and slash empty air just a hair or two above the bottles in the floating basket. It shrank away from his leaping steel, but Durnan didn't notice as he bounded through an archway that his wards would let only him pass through, and down the steep dark steps beyond. For the first time in long, dusty years he was off to war!

The floating basket of bottles, forgotten behind him, tried to dart through the wards in his wake. There was a flash of aroused magic and a reeling rebound.

The basket seemed to sigh for just an instant before it crashed to the floor, shattering at least one bottle of belaerd. Dark whisky gurgled out across the floor... but no one was there to hear it.

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"Transtra? I know you're in there! Come out and fight, all the

gods damn you, or I'll—"
The speaker did not wait to finish his threat, but dealt the door a heavy blow. It shuddered sufficiently that neither occupant of the chamber beyond the door needed to see the bright edge of the axeblade breaking through on the second blow to know that the door would not withstand a third strike.
The fat, red-faced man in the room broke off his muttered negotiations and stood hastily back to give his business associate the room she needed. Serpentine coils slithered around his feet as she drew herself up, swaying slightly, and frowned in concentration.
Transtra's flame-red hair and beautiful, unclad upper body remained unchanged, the string of rubies she wore still winking between her breasts—but below her slim waist the scales melted away and her tail shrank into long, human legs. Mirt stepped firmly forward between them, the magic that protected him from her touch flaring into life, and swept her into an amorous embrace just as a splintering crash heralded the collapse of the door.
The shrieks and cart-rumbles of bustling Skullport flooded into the room. Aminotaur's long-horned head ducked through the wreckage of the door, warily following the huge broadaxe. Its nostrils flared as it roared, "Transtra?"
Mirt lifted his head from yielding, cherry flavored lips and rumbled testily, "Ye've got the wrong room, hornhead—and I've paid for this one."
The minotaur bellowed its anger and lurched forward— but came to an abrupt halt as a slim blade rose smoothly from between the floorboards in front of it, ascending with deadly stealth. "The next one'll rise between your legs," the fat moneylender growled, "unless they walk on out of here right swiftly. Hear me?"
The minotaur glared at him then stared hard at the woman Mirt held, muttered, "Sorry," and withdrew. The stout moneylender held up a hand and let the second ring on it do

its work, enshrouding the open doorway and the walls all around in a cloaking mist. The sounds of Skullport died away abruptly as the ward took effect and in the stillness a steely voice close by his throat said firmly, "My thanks for your quick-witted courtesy, Mirt. You can let go of me now and step well clear."

"Anything to avoid unpleasantness—and gore," the moneylender quipped, complying. "Ye make a fine lass, Transtra."

"Not for you, I don't," the lamia noble replied sharply, as scales began to reappear on her lengthening legs. "Let's keep to matters of trade-bars and importation, shall we? I believe

we'd reached six-score casks of belaerd and ten strongchests of heavy chain."

"Ye don't want to throw in a ruby or two?" Mirt rumbled, raising an eyebrow. The lamia regarded him coldly.

"No," she said shortly, "I don't."

"Ah," Mirt said airily, "then I've something of thine to return, it seems." He held out a string of rubies in one stubby-fingered hand. Transtra frowned at it, then looked down to where her unbound hair cascaded over her bosom. The bottom three stones on her string were missing.

She snarled as she raised blazing eyes to his—but Mirt bowed gravely to her as she snatched her rubies back, and with his chin close to the floor looked up and flashed her a momentary, wild rolling-eyed idiot's grin.

Transtra's tail lashed the floor for a perilous moment or two thereafter, before her hisses of fury slowly relaxed into a rueful, head-shaking chuckle.

"You've never played me false yet," she said in quiet surprise, watching the shaggy-haired man straighten with a grunt and wheeze. "How is it, then, that you make any coins at all?"

"My boundless charm," Mirt explained nonchalantly, "leaves rich women swooning in my arms, anxious to make gifts of

their baubles to one so attentive and—er, gifted—as I. 'Tis what's brought me all this grand way, to where I am today."
"A rented upstairs escort's chamber in the worst brothel in Skullport?" Transtra asked sardonically, gliding toward him.
Mirt stuck hairy thumbs in his belt and harrumphed. "Well, lass, 'tis no secret that my discretion—"
"Has slipped indeed if you dare call me 'lass,' " was the acidic reply as the lamia noble folded her arms and drew herself up, tapping the floor with the tip of her tail in irritation.
Mirt waved a dismissive hand. "If ye think a little assumed pique will make me remorseful and somehow beholden as we talk more trade, think awhile again, little scaled one."
"Little scaled one?" the lamia noble hissed, truly angry now, bending toward him with blazing eyes. "Why, I've a—"
She reared back, startled, and hastily raised her hands to hurl a spell as a pinwheel of tiny lights suddenly appeared in midair in front of her. Transtra glared angrily at the merchant, but saw that this apparition was no doing of his; Mirt was as surprised as she. The lamia noble backed away, hands raised in readiness.
A whisper familiar to Mirt arose from those circling lights: "Gone into Undermountain to rescue Nythyx Thunderstaff, old friend; I may need help." The first ring on Mirt's hand quivered in response, silently tugging him in the direction of his friend Durnan's distant inn.
Mirt followed that urging, striding across the floor in his battered, flopping old boots toward the shattered door. Transtra drew smoothly aside to let him pass; he seemed to have forgotten she was in the room. The wards parted soundlessly at the frowning old merchant's approach, and he stepped out into the passage, finding it unencumbered by minotaurs. A few steps took him to the nearest window.
The fat merchant looked out and down over the walled, warded courtyard of Bindle's Blade, the newest tankard-house in dark and dangerous Skullport. He'd glanced at the

tables there through this window out of old habit upon arrival, and was sure he'd then seen... aye. He had.
A recent venture in Skullport that had met with general approval were the many guttering guide-torches that could be hired for an evening—carried wherever one willed by floating, disembodied skeletal hands. Many of these flickering innovations were bobbing and glimmering among the carefully-spaced tables of the Blade right now, and one of them shone quite clearly on the face of Nythyx Thunderstaff, sitting calmly with several female slave-dealers, a long, tall flagon of amberjack in her hand and a slim long sword at her hip. As he watched, she laughed at someone's jest and slid back in her chair to plant one delicately booted foot atop the table, raising her flagon in salute to the slaver who'd amused her. Umhuh. If that was a woman in distress, he'd hate to see a confident and contented one.
Mirt watched the young noble stretch in her chair, catlike, and glance around. He drew back before she might happen to look up and shook his shaggy head. "Well," he said slowly, "Well, well."
"This . . . thing that has befallen," the lamia noble said from close behind him, "has put an end to our trade-talk for now, has it not?"
Mirt turned to look into eyes the color of flame, and noticed —not for the first time—just how beautiful Transtra was. "It has," he said almost sadly, and his business associate gave him a little, catlike smile as the flickering fire of a ready spell faded from one slim, long-nailed hand.
"There'll be . . . other evenings," she purred, slithering past so closely that her leathery scales brushed along his arm. Mirt watched her go down the stairs into the darkness before he stirred, harrumphed, and shook his head. It was a pity he was so stout, and that lamia nobles ate human flesh. He'd started to want that little smile to mean the other thing.
He stepped back into his room and did something to the first

ring. A tiny pinwheel of silver star-motes obediently arose to silently circle it. He bent over them and murmured, "Gone out into Skullport to answer Durnan's call for aid in rescuing Nythyx Thunderstaff; I've seen her safe here, so expect a ruse."

As the magelight faded, the fat, aging Harper and Lord of Waterdeep muttered something over his other ring to draw the tatters of his ward in around him, so he'd be cloaked against flying death on his walk through Skullport. Shops and faces in the undercity changed with brutal rapidity, but the place grew no more tolerant of the weak and unwary. Mirt looked all around then took something small from his belt-pouch to hold ready in his hand as he trudged along the passage to take another, hidden stair out of the House of the Long Slow Kiss. He left the ruined door open behind him so Hlardas would know he was gone and turn off the foot-treadle blades.

Yet he'd best shout a reminder while passing the kitchens. One could lose good chambermaids that way.

Asper hurled herself into a somersault over the startled guard's head and spun around as her bare feet bounced to a landing on the cold flagstones. The city guardsman turned with smooth speed, magnificent in his splendid armor—in time to see the gleaming pommel of the young lady's pionard a finger away from his eyes, where its wicked point should have been. He'd barely begun to gape at it when the pommel of her reversed long sword nudged his ribs, just where it would have driven all breath out of him had this fight been in earnest.

He stared into the sweat-slick face of the grinning ash-blonde girl and shook his head in surrender, drops of his own sweat flying from the end of his nose. "I see ye do it," he growled, "but I still don't believe it."

"Consider yourself slain, Herle," said the guardcaptain from behind him, "and next time, try not to turn like some sort of sleeping elephant. She could have put her blade through

your neck and been gone out the door before you were well into your pivot!"
"Aye, captain," Herle said heavily. "Just once, I'd like to see y—"
He fell silent to gape at a pinwheel of tiny lights that silently appeared in midair, one by one, in front of his leather-clad foe. Asper watched them spin into bright solidity in wary silence, one hand raised to bid the guardsmen keep still.
A hoarse whisper she knew well arose from those circling lights. "Gone out into Skullport to answer Durnan's call for aid in rescuing Nythyx Thunderstaff; I've seen her safe here, so expect a ruse."
The motes of light faded until she knew only she could see them, thanks to Mirt's magic, drifting into a line leading north—and sharply downward. Into Undermountain, below even this deep, dank castle cellar.
Asper frowned at the tiny points of light. Her man had sent her his message in case Durnan's call had been false—a ruse to lure Mirt himself into danger. And, ruse or not, unless either of the old Lords of Waterdeep had changed a goodly amount in the last few days, they'd sorely need her aid soon.
She turned and bowed to the watching guardsmen.
"It's been a pleasure breaking blades with you, as always, gentlesirs," she told them, wiping sweat from her brow with one leather-clad forearm as she stepped into her boots. "I must go; I'm needed."
"Is it something we should know about?" the guardcaptain asked, frowning.
Asper shook her head. "Lords' business," she said, and ran lightly out of the room, leaving the armsmen staring after her.
"How can one woman's blade—even that woman's—matter to the Lords of Waterdeep?" one asked, in tones of wonder. "What is she, that they need her to aid them so often?"
"Friend," Herle replied, "You try to best her at blade-work next time, then come and ask me again." And he casually

cast the blade in his hand end over end down the length of that vast chamber, into the gloryhole in the far corner—an opening no larger than his fist. It settled home, hilt-deep, with a rattling clang, and all his fellows turned to regard him with whistles of awe. Herle spread his hands and added, "You all saw what she did to me. However good one is, there's always someone better."

Another guard shivered. "I'd not like to meet whoever's better than she is."

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"And now for the other working," the eye tyrant breathed, turning an eyestalk toward a certain shadowed cavity high in the cavern wall. Something small and glossy obediently rose into view there, drifting smoothly out into the greater emptiness of the main cavern: a shining sphere of polished crystal about as tall as a large human head. It winked and sparkled as it glided toward the beholder—then grew brighter, a pale greenish glow awakening within it.

"Yessss," Xuzoun gloated as an image became apparent in the crystal's depths. Woodlands, wrapped about a young, slim human female who was turning smoothly in her saddle to laugh, unbound blonde hair swirling about her shoulders. Her mirth and unheard words were directed to a young man riding into the scene with humor dancing in his own eyes. The watching beholder's mouth twisted in what might have been a sneer.

"Shandril Shessair within my power, and knowing it not," the beholder purred. "Only a few enchantments more, then ... ah, yes, then spellfire will be drawn forth from her at my desire, to be hurled at any who defy me! Many shall pay the debts they owe me, very shortly thereafter..."

A stalactite elsewhere in the cavern yawned, then muttered, " 'Only a few enchantments more' before I rule the world? How many times have I heard that before?"

A black bat, hanging upside down from a nearby stalactite, turned its head and blinked. "Elminster?" it asked. "It is

you... is it not? You felt the weaving too? "
"Of course and of course," the rocky fang replied. "I can feel all bindings laid on the lass. If Halaster did more in his domain than just watch the free entertainment, I'd not be here, but..."
"Watching is almost always best," the stalactite beneath the clinging bat's claws said coldly, and quivered slightly. "You always did act too swiftly and change Faerun too much, Elminster."
The bat took startled wing, beating a hasty flight across to the rock that was the Old Mage. "Halaster?" it asked cautiously, as it alighted and turned to look back.
"The same, Laeral," replied the dagger of rock where it had first clung. "Are we agreed that this Xuzoun should never wield spellfire?"
The other two murmured "Aye" together.
"Then trust me to foil this magic in a way that will leave Shandril and the beholder both unknowing," Halaster replied. "I keep my house ordered as I see fit—though you, Lady Mage of Waterdeep, are welcome to dabble. Your touch is more deft than most."
The bat looked from one stalactite to the other, aware of a certain tension in the air that felt like the two ancient archwizards had locked gazes and were staring steadfastly into the depths of each other's souls. Silence stretched and sang between them. Then, because of who she was, Laeral dared to ask, "And what of Elminster? Is he also welcome in Undermountain?"
"What little sanity I have I owe to him," Halaster replied, "and I respect him for his mastery of magic—and his compassion—more than any other living mage. Yet for what he did to me . . . what he had to do to me ... I bear him no great love."
Two dark, hawklike eyes were fading into view in the rock, and they flickered as the Master of Undermountain added quietly, "This is my home, and a man may shut the gates of

his home to anyone he desires to be free of."
The stalactite that was Elminster said as gently, "I have no quarrel with that. Know that my gate is always open to you."
"I appreciate that," the dark-eyed stalactite told him grudgingly, before it faded silently away.
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He hadn't used this passage for years, and had almost forgotten the trip step and the anklebreak holes beyond. The battered old coffer was still on the high ledge where it should be, though. Durnan lifted out the string of potions and gratefully slid them onto his belt, tapping the metal vials to be sure they were still full. Then he took up the wisp of gauzy black cloth that had lain beneath them and bound it over his eyes.
All at once the clinging darkness receded and he could see as clearly in the gloom as creatures who dwelt in the World Below. He took the gorget out of its clip on the inside coffer lid and slid the second nightmask into its carry-sleeve before he buckled it around his throat. It just might be needed.
The tavernmaster caught himself wondering what else he should bring along, and sighed, banishing an image of himself staggering along under the weight of a generously pot-and-flask-girdled pack larger than he was. It had been a long time since he'd leaped into battle with only a sword in his hand and fire in his eyes. It had been even longer since he'd felt that invulnerable.
Durnan drew a deep breath, shrugged his shoulders once or twice to break the tension that had been building
there, clapped a hand to the hilt of his sword to ensure it rode loosely in its scabbard, and set off down the narrow passage. Two secret doors ground open under his hand to let him pass, and he closed them carefully behind him. Beyond the second was a room in Undermountain he knew well.
Standing just inside it, Durnan peered around to make sure nothing had changed since he'd last seen it, then stepped carefully around the waiting falling-block trap and across the

chamber. It was thick with dust, cobwebs, and the crumbling skeletons of several unfortunate adventurers still stuck to the tattered webs of a long-slain spider. Shoving these husks aside with his blade, Durnan strode softly out into the vast dungeon where so many had died.

Undermountain was the abode of the mad wizard Halaster and the graveyard of thousands of fearsome monsters and foolhardy men alike. Once it had been Durnan's playground, a place to stay limber after a long day standing behind the bar listening to young nobles and would-be adventurers from afar boast of what they'd do and win down in the lightless depths. All too often, he'd come across their bodies too late to save them from traps they should have been anticipating and predators they should have been ready for.

Thinking of which ... he drew his blade and stabbed upward as he leaned through an open doorway. It slid into something solid yet yielding, and Durnan drew back to avoid the falling body. The thing that had awaited him above the door crashed heavily to the flagstones. It was a kobold, a strangle-wire still clutched in its convulsing hands.

Durnan put his sword tip through its throat just to be sure as he kicked the heavy stone door hard, sending it smashing back against the wall of the chamber. There were some wet crackings and a bubbling gasp from behind it, and something slid to the floor. Something koboldish, no doubt.

A third of the sly, yammering little beasts scuttled into view at the far end of the room, and Durnan brought his sword up to strike aside the javelin it hurled. The bracers he wore protected him against missiles that bore no enchantments, but 'twould be a little late to discover that this particular javelin was magical, once it was in his throat...

The throw was wide, and a smooth sidestep took him completely out of the hurtling weapon's path. Even before it crashed off stone behind him, the old warrior was moving.

Durnan caught hold of the doorframe as he charged through the door and swung himself around hard to the right. As

he'd expected, a line of three kobolds was waiting along the wall there, their spiked clubs and wicked blades raised. The tavernmaster had a glimpse of their startled faces before his blade found the face of the foremost. He kept rushing, driving the dying creature back into its fellows, tumbling them all to the floor. He kicked, stomped, and thrust ruthlessly with his blade, knowing how vicious kobolds could be, and spun from the last fallen victim to face the one who'd hurled the javelin.

It was snarling and backing away, fear in its eyes as it saw all of its fellows dead or dying. Durnan advanced a step and it spat in his direction, whirled, and fled through the archway at the far end of the room. Durnan knelt, plucked up a kobold blade, and flung it as hard as he could.

There was a heavy crash, clang, and moan beyond the arch, but Durnan was already running hard. The wise leave no foes alive behind them in Undermountain.

A thrust ended the kobold's feeble crawl, and Durnan picked up its bleeding body and hurled it into the next room. As he'd expected, something greenish-yellow flowed swiftly down the wall toward the corpse. Durnan peered into the room—paying particular attention to the ceiling—then, satisfied that it held only one carrion crawler, sprinted across the chamber and through the right-hand door at its far end, pulling the heavy stone barrier closed behind him. Something far off and in agony promptly screamed in the dark distance ahead.

The passage before him was the only link between the warren of rooms around his cellars and the rest of Undermountain. It was always a place to watch warily for oozes, slimes, and other silent, hard-to-see creeping things.

Scorch marks and unpleasant remnants on the stones around told him the kobolds had recently cleared this way of at least one such peril. Durnan stalked cautiously on,

wondering how Mirt was faring and how soon they'd meet. It felt good to be in action again, though the glory days of the

Four were long gone.
Once the brazen, impudent band of adventurers he and Mirt had led had been the toast of Waterdeep and a common headache of honest merchants up and down the Sword Coast, the heroes of impudent tales men roared admiringly over in half a hundred taverns. But years had passed and the roars had faded—as, he supposed, they always did. All that was left of those times were happy memories, the deep trust they yet shared, and the linked message rings all of the Four still wore. Durnan saw Mirt and Asper often, but Randal Morn was off fighting in distant Daggerdale to keep his rightful rule over that fair vale... and the ranger Florin Falconhand, who'd stood in for Asper on a foray or three, was a Knight of Myth Drannor these days, and seldom seen on the Sword Coast. There were even whispers that he'd visited fabled Evermeet...
Durnan was still recalling splendid victories the Four had shared when sudden magelight welled up all around him in the empty passage. He'd just time to feel disgusted— taken by sorcery again?—when his world was overwhelmed with whirling lights and there was nothing under his boots anymore.
"Beshaba's kiss!" he swore disgustedly. The tavernmaster knew a teleport was whisking him away to somewhere worse. They always took you somewhere worse.
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Transtra stood in a room that few in Skullport knew was her own, eyes narrow and face frowning. Old Mirt's ring had spoken and that meant one of the Four had called on him for aid. And when the Four called, it always meant trouble for someone. Sooner or later, if that fat old merchant didn't lose some weight and gain some prudence in trade for it, the recipient of the trouble was going to be him. Perhaps on an occasion sooner than he expected, such as—this one.
The lamia noble stirred into life, tossing her flame-red
hair so it cascaded down her back like languid fire, and

glided across the tiles like a gigantic upright snake. The soft, ever-shifting spell-lights she loved dappled her gleaming flesh in a shifting pattern that made her slave, a thin and dirty human man cowering on his knees in a corner, swallow and turn his eyes swiftly away. Transtra was apt to be cruel when his more lusty thoughts became apparent, and her cruelty often seemed to reach the climax of its outpouring in enthusiastic floggings with well-salted whips. The slave shivered involuntarily at the memory of his last one.

The dry slithering of her scales on the tiles drew closer, then stopped. The man kept his gaze on the corner, trying not to tremble as cold fear rose in his throat and he wondered just what she might do this time.

"Torthan," she said, almost gently, "get up and go do a thing for me."

Torthan reluctantly raised his eyes to meet hers. "Great lady?"

"Open the gate that brings Ulisss, then go to your room," Transtra told him.

As he hastened obediently away, Torthan could hear her muttering the first words of the web of spells she used to lay unshakable commands on the behir.

When the twelve-legged serpent thing glided into the room with deadly speed and raised its horned head to gape its jaws at her, Transtra faced it with both of her hands held over her head, spell-flames circling them.

Ulisss lowered its head in a gesture of submission and sighed in disgust. One day it would catch its cruel mistress in a moment of weakness and slay her—but not this day.

Transtra let the fires rage up and down her arms as she slithered up to the huge serpent-creature and embraced its head as if it were a pet, stroking it behind its horns just where Ulisss best loved her touch.

Warily tense muscles under iron-hard scales quivered under her caress, relaxed with a slow surge, then slowly, reluctantly started to rub against her as the monster began

to purr. Transtra let a spell-image of Mirt flow into his slow, dim mind and said softly, "Hearken, 0 scaly beloved, for I've a task for thee. Follow this man—aye, his girth is amusingly enormous—and..."

As she whispered on, the behir's eyes grew brighter and more golden with wicked hunger and excitement—and when she released it, it slithered off on its mission with eager haste.

Transtra swayed upright, folded her arms across her breasts, and watched it go. Though there was a dangerous glitter in her eyes, the smile that crept slowly across her face was catlike in its anticipation. As she readied the spell that would let her watch both Mirt and Ulisss and spy on what befell from afar, her tongue curled out between her lips in private mirth. The possible loss of a business associate was a small price to pay for the grand entertainment to come.

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"What can go wrong? The plan is perfect," Iraeghlee said testily, its mouth-tentacles whipping and curling in irritation.

"You're not the first down the centuries to say those words," Yloebre remarked dryly, twirling the slim glass of duiruin in its fingers so the luminous golden bubbles deep in the black wine winked and sparkled. "Any number of things can go awry."

"Such as?" Iraeghlee challenged. "Not even the Merciless Ones Beneath Anauroch know of our whisperer. The beholder's no fool, yet has no inkling of its presence ... or, thus, our influence."

"That may be so only because we've not awakened any control over it yet," Yloebre told the depths of the glass it held. The small worms there curled and uncurled in their endless undead dance that kept the oily black wine from thickening into a syrup.

"Do you doubt my skill?" Iraeghlee spat, leaning forward in its chair with a hiss of rippling silk sleeves. "It ate the whisperer, which in turn ate its way into what little Xuzoun

has of the paltry things eye tyrants are pleased to call their brains! I felt it take in beholder blood and grow! I felt it through the linkage my magic made—a link I can make anew whenever I desire! Do you doubt me, younger one? Do you truly dare?"

"Untwist thy tentacles and hiss less loudly," Yloebre responded calmly, sipping more wine. "I doubt nothing about your ability to establish control over the eye tyrant—only as to our shared ability to escape the notice of the powers hereabouts. The whisperer is a brain node, linked to you by magic. The Place of Skulls above us, and the city above that, seem to fairly crawl with wizards and priests able to see magic in use, and themselves governed—nay, driven—by that appalling human fault known as 'curiosity' What's to keep us from coming under attack within a breath or two of you crushing Xuzoun's will?"

Iraeghlee's mauve skin was almost black with anger. Its voice quivered with rage and menace as it said slowly, "Hear this, feeblewits, and let one hearing be enough: No drow nor human, from matron mothers to archniages, can detect our whisperer, or us, while we remain here."

Yloebre glanced at the stone walls around them, adorned by a single glowshift sculpture that chimed softly from time to time as its shape altered. The chamber held only their floating chairs, several floating tables (including the palely-glowing one between them), and the fluted and many-hued array of flasks and glasses that its current sample had come from. Unseen runes of power crawled and twisted on the undersides of the tables, awaiting a call to life from either illithid, but there were no other defenses save what they could personally cast or wield.

Not that such things were likely to be needed. They were six shifts away from a cesspool-cellar under the gambling house known as the Blushing Bride's Burial Pit in southern Skullport—a chain of trapped teleports that should be long enough to fool or slay even the most persistent and powerful

of nosy wizards.
It was at about that moment that the table between them grew two dark, grave eyes—and exploded into blazing shards that hurled both mind flayers back against the walls of their hideaway, broken and sizzling.
The last words Yloebre ever heard, as it struggled against rising, searing red pain, was a man's voice saying disgustedly, "Stupid illithids. Must they always meddle?"
The crushed, half-melted bodies of the mind flayers slid like slime down the walls; neither survived long enough to see Halaster Blackcloak's eyes blast their tables and flasks to dancing sparks and flying dust.
After his gaze had roved about the entire chamber and he was satisfied no other mind-signatures were to be found on the whisperer growing in the beholder's distant brain, the wizard sighed and turned to pass through the teleport once more—only to turn slowly and glare with renewed fury at the turning, chiming glowshift sculpture.
It had escaped—or resisted—his destructive gaze unharmed.
Halaster's black eyes narrowed, then hardened into rays of darkness that leaped and stabbed through the air, only to strike the sculpture and be drained away to somewhere else, leaving the chiming construct unharmed.
"Who—?" Halaster snarled, shifting into a more tangible, upright form.
The sculpture cleared its throat and said mildly, "Why, me, of course. We agreed that action in thy house was undesirable if not of thy doing—but we said nothing of mere watching. Tis how I learn things, ye see."
"Elminster," Halaster said, fading back into a darkness studded with two eyes as sharp as spear points, "one day you'll overstep the marks I set... and then..."
"Ye'll try to slay me, and fail, and I'll have to decide how merciful to be with ye," the sculpture replied merrily. "Those who set marks, know ye, are usually better employed doing something else."

"Do not presume to threaten me," Halaster's voice replied, as if from a great distance, as the darkness that was the Master of Undermountain began to whirl about the unseen teleport.
"That was not a threat," the sculpture said mildly. "I never threaten—only promise."
The reply that came back out of the teleport sounded very much like the rude lip-flapping sound known in some realms as a "raspberry."
Durnan was still swearing when the whirling blue mists faded and the world returned: a darkly cavernous world of many lamps and torches, sharp with the smell of a recent spellblast. Its smokes curled lazily past him as he stumbled on uneven, shifting rubble then crouched, blade up, to look all around.
There was a murmur off to his right. Durnan looked that way first and found himself regarding an interested crowd of mongrelmen, hobgoblins, bugbears, ores, wererats, kenku, blade-bristling humans, drow, imps, and worse. They were standing on a torchlit street making bets and excited comments—as they stared right back at him.
Skullport. He was in Skullport. The surprise on some of the faces and a sudden flurry of betting suggested his arrival hadn't been expected. Wherefore this crowd had gathered to witness something else. Durnan glanced left and right into the dark, smoking ruin around him. Ah hah. Indeed.
A beholder hung in the air off to his left, its eyes gleaming with malice as it glared at him and through him, at... a mauve, glistening creature with a tentacled face and white, pupilless eyes that stood in dark, ornate robes well off to his right—and was raising its three-fingered hands in clawing, spell-hurling gestures as it coldly hissed an incantation. A mind flayer... and an eye tyrant. Dueling with magic. And he was between them.
"Thank you, Beshaba!" the tavernmaster snarled in sarcastic thanks to the goddess of misfortune as he dived headlong onto the rubble, framing a scene in his mind of opening a

certain ivory door with the dragonscale key. The mental vision grew clear, the door swung wide—and Durnan remembered to close his eyes just in time.

The white light in his mind was nothing to the blinding flash that marked the breaking of the dragon rune he bore on his left wristlet. As that broad metal band crumbled, giving his forearm an eerie tingling as it fell away, Durnan rolled over a low stone wall, dropped onto a sunken floor, and found his feet. There came a hubbub of excitement from the crowd as the tavernmaster started his sprint through the pillars and tumbled stones, and got his eyes open again.

The white ring of radiance that marked the rune's release of power was still rolling outwards, moving with him in a flickering, expanding dome of protection. Spell rays and gaze attacks alike would be shattered by its touch—for an all-too-short time.

"Tymora"aid me!" he gasped as he ran, dodging between two blackened stubs of stone wall that stood like frozen fingers reaching vainly for the cavern ceiling overhead. If Lady Luck smiled on him, the dragon rune would guard his back from the beholder's eye powers long enough for him to reach the mind flayer. Aye, if...

Dark robes flickered ahead as the illithid dodged this way and that, trying to see him as he darted through the ruins. Durnan snatched out his belt-knife as he ran, dust-sash flapping, and the mind flayer spat one loud word somewhere ahead of him.

There was a flash, a roar of tortured stone, and one of the walls ahead burst into fist-sized chunks of rubble. Durnan spun behind a pillar until the worst crashings of striking, rolling stones were under way around him, then sped on. If a certain old and overweight tavernmaster could just move well enough, there'd be no time for the thing to work another spell!

He snarled at his own slowness as he leaped over the rubble. He'd just had a momentary glimpse of the beholder, drifting

along after him but keeping well back. It must not be hungry... or at least, not very hungry.
Durnan was close to the illithid now, stones rolling underfoot in his haste as he burst through a doorway into a room that was no longer there, and saw it beyond the crumbling wall ahead. Its glistening, slime-covered hands darted to its belt and plucked forth a broad-bladed hooked sword. A blade? Usually they were too eager to flail at your head with those brain-sucking tentacles to bother with steel...
The squidlike growths around the thing's mauve mouth were writhing in excitement, Durnan saw, as he came around one last jagged end of wall and rushed down on his foe.
A boot coming down wrongly on loose rubble now could mean his swift death, he reminded himself grimly, and hunkered down as he ran to keep his balance, skidding deliberately when he reached a knob of stone he could hook one boot around.
Eagerly, the mind flayer pounced on the seemingly off-balance human, those four tentacles stabbing greedily out. Durnan raised one arm to fend them aside, hooking the edge of his knife around the nearest one, and slashed viciously at their roots.
The mind flayer's sword came up rather clumsily to clang against his blade, and he used the speed he'd built up to smash it aside with one shoulder and dive past the thing, lashing out with one boot to kick it in the chest.
There were shouts from the watching crowd and the fast-paced chatter of changing bets as Durnan rolled to his feet, bounced off a spar of stone, and charged back at the thing. He dare not turn his back on it and try to run for the street—not only would it have time to hurl a spell at his back, but the crowd might well draw steel on him, or bar his way for its own amusement, to force him to turn and fight.
The mind flayer's body seemed misshapen. It wavered as it rose from the rubble where it had fallen—just in time to quail and hiss under the bite of Durnan's sword. Once, twice, the

true steel slashed, hacking tentacles away—and the blood that splattered forth was not the milky ichor it should have been, but a dark, reddish-green gore!

Frowning, Durnan cut away the last tentacle and drew back his blade for a final thrust through one of those furiously-glaring white eyes—only to see it melt away before him, slumping down into something like a long, reddish worm or clump of worms that slithered and flapped wet, fast-sprouting fleshy wings in its haste to escape. He hacked at the glistening thing in disgust, backing away to keep an eye out for tentacles heading for his ankles.

There was angry shouting from the crowd: The shape-shift had told them the thing Durnan faced was no mind flayer, but something else . . . and who could bet on an unknown shape-shifting thing that was swiftly being
hacked apart by this hard-breathing human?

Amid curses, a tankard flew through the air to rattle among the tumbled stones not far away. It was shortly followed by another. Enraged bettors were venting their feelings. Luckily, the state of things in Skullport was such that few would dare to throw daggers when a ready knife might be needed more pressingly to settle a dispute nearer to hand in the crowd...

"Well, thank the gods for such grand favors," Durnan muttered aloud at that grim thought, as he ducked away from a part of the worm-thing that had suddenly grown bony spurs and was flailing at him. He took one numbing gash high on his arm, near his left shoulder—then he and his foe both staggered. Someone in the crowd had hurled a blasting spell strong enough to rock the ruins at them both—and the dragon rune's dome had flung it straight back at its source.

The packed throng of spectators was suddenly a screaming, fleeing mob generously sprayed with blood. Pulped, boneless things struggled weakly on the slick stones around a ring of cleared space at the center of the lane.

Durnan lunged under his foe's bony, flailing arm and caught

hold of the worm-like coils, lifting them with a grunt. There was a horrible shifting and wriggling in his hands as slashing teeth and talons struggled to be born—then the tavernmaster set his teeth and heaved, the muscles in his shoulders rippled, and the shapeshifting thing was flung away through the air.

It landed with a heavy, wet smack, flopped spasmodically once or twice, but could not lift itself off the row of iron spikes that stuck up through its flowing flesh like a line of blades before it sagged, burbled forth a whistling sigh, and hung limp. Dark gore dripped slowly onto the stones beneath. Useful things, sword blade fences.

A deep blue glow flickered and faded around the corpse as it melted back into the ungainly limbs and bare-brained, fanged head of a doppleganger. The glow of dying magic.

Durnan's eyes narrowed as a flare of white light marked the passing of his own dragon-rune defenses. Someone—in the crowd?—had been feeding that beast spells, and probably controlling it, too...

"I am Xuzoun," a deep voice rolled out from close behind him, heavy with confident menace, "and you, Durnan of Waterdeep, have just slain my most loyal servant."

Durnan spun around to find—as he'd expected—the beholder looming over him, great and terrible. Its huge, lone central eye gloated coldly as the stones all around him erupted into conjured, questing black tentacles.

"The teleport that brought me here was yours, then?" Durnan asked. "And this... duel staged for my benefit?" His face and voice showed no fear as his sword and knife came up smoothly to face the eye tyrant—and the tentacles grew around him like swaying, upright eels.

"Of course," the beholder told him silkily. "I've gone to much trouble to take you."

Durnan cast a quick look around at the slowly and carefully closing ring of tentacles. "And why would that be?" he asked softly.

"I desire to wear the body of a Lord of Waterdeep for a time," the fell monster replied, with a smile that displayed a row of jagged fangs that in places outstripped his sword for length. "And—unfortunately for the sometimes-famous and often beloved-of-the-gods man called Durnan—I've chosen you."

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Strange sights in plenty are seen in Skullport, and folk who survive there long have learned not to stare overmuch, nor linger long in one place, lest they be marked for dealing with later. So it was that no lizardman nor scurrying halfling moved more than a wary eyeball as a little line of drifting, dancing sparks of radiance came out of the darkness, heading down a certain alley that was narrow and noisome even for the Source of Slaves. A sorceress out a-hunting from the great city above, perhaps, or a fetch sent by a noble's pet wizard, or a brood of will o' wisp younglings? It was better not to speculate, but merely to observe without being seen to look, and mark where the lights went.

More than a few of those watchful eyes widened as they recognized the shuffling, wheezing bulk that trudged along in the lights' wake, worn leather boots flopping. A Lord of Waterdeep, now...

Many folk now skulking the streets of Skullport would fain be seeing the sun over Waterdeep above were it not for the Lords' decrees—and Mirt had made rather more than a handcount of personal foes down the years, too. Some of them had offered much coin for his delivery to their feet, alive and more or less whole—or failing that, just his head, goggling at them on a platter.

So it was that the distinctive rolling walk and bristling moustache was noticed often, and excited whispers and hurryings followed those recognitions. It was not long before a dagger spun out of the night, thrown hard and unerringly, coming fast at the old Harper's left eyeball. Mirt ignored it, keeping his gaze instead on the stones underfoot, any bodies that might be moving out to block his path, and the

guiding trail of star-motes.
The dagger struck his invisible shields and spun away with the faintest of singing sounds, heading back at the hand that had flung it. So, too, did the first stone that leaped out of the darkness at the back of Mirt's head, and the second; the band of slayers-for-hire called Hoelorton's Hands were known to be deft hands with a sling.
Or a cudgel. Mirt heard the faint scrape of a rushing boot on stone and spun around like a wary barrel, his dagger gleaming in one fat fist. Two rogues were almost upon him, running fast. One swung his stout club in a deadly arc as he came.
The fat moneylender's hairy fingers plucked at the battered wood as it whistled past, and pulled. Overbalanced, the startled man barely had time for an apprehensive grunt as the pommel of Mirt's dagger came up under his chin and sent him swiftly into the arms of the ladies who whisper softly to warriors in slumber: He crashed over like a felled tree, spitting teeth from his shattered jaw, his eyes already dark.
The second man had to dance around the falling body and met Mirt's roundhouse left while trying to get his cudgel up. Mirt let his knuckles take the man's head into the nearest wall, hard, and felt something break under them before he spun away to follow the drifting lights again, wheezing along patiently as if nothing had befallen. The two huddled bodies in the alley did not rise to follow.
Another dagger flashed out of the darkness and a bucketful of stones plummeted from the air as Mirt trudged under one of the many catwalks that crisscrossed the emptiness above most streets and passages of Skullport. His shields sent both offerings back whence they'd come, journeys marked by one strangled, gurgling cry.
Mirt sighed in reply—Faerun certainly seemed to breed no pressing shortage of fools, these days—and hunched his shoulders to pass under a particularly low catwalk.

A garotte slipped down and around his throat as he emerged into the torchlight beyond—but the fat old Lord paid it no apparent heed, striding deliberately on. Only the corded muscles rising into view on his thick neck betrayed the effort it took to walk on without slowing, as the waxed cord skittered over the hard, smooth steel of the gorget that covered his grizzled throat.

It took less than a breath before the wheezing merchant reached the full stretch of the deadly cord and the skilled arms that wielded it, and their leather-clad owner pitched forward out of the darkness above with a startled oath, hauled down into the street like a grain sack from a loft. A casual swing of one thick arm brought the ready dagger solidly into the masked man's temple, and the garotte fell to the cobbles alongside its limp, crumpled owner. Mirt did not even bother to look down; this was Skullport, after all. Moreover, business awaited ahead ... and if he knew Durnan, 'twould be hasty business.

Three masked figures stepped out of a side alley a little way ahead of him, but Mirt showed no sign of slowing or drawing the stout sword at his belt. He forged on steadily into waiting death, and after a tense moment, one of the three stepped back and waved at his fellows to do likewise.

"Your pardon, Mirt," he growled. "You're looking so well, I almost didn't know you."

"Prettily said, Ilbarth," Mirt grunted, turning suddenly to glare at one of the others, who'd sidled just a step too close to the fat old man's back. "So ye can live, all of ye."

"Generous, white-whiskers," that man said softly, "when it's three to one."

"I'm known for my open-handed generosity," Mirt said, baring his teeth in a grin without slowing, "so I'll let ye live a second time, Aldon. Take care ye don't use up all thy luck and my patience, now."

Aldon took one uncertain step in pursuit of the wheezing man. "How'd you know my name?"

"He knows everyone in Skullport," Ilbarth said with a nervous grin. "Isn't that right, Mirt? I'll bet cold coin you've lived all your life down here."
"Not yet," Mirt grunted, turning to fix him with one cold and level gray-blue eye. "Not quite yet."
He turned away and went on down the alley without looking back, but the three men did not follow. They stood watching him for a time, and soon had cause to be very glad they'd not proceeded with more violent activities.
The old moneylender strode past a tentacle that slid down from an upper window to pluck aloft a man who'd whistled to summon it, stepped around an ore sprawled on its face in a pool of blood with a spear standing up in its back, and found his way suddenly blocked by a dozen or more lithe, slim figures whose skin was as jet black as the soft leathers they wore. Almost mockingly, the line of guiding motes of light winked and sparkled in the distance beyond them.
"How now, old man?" one of the drow hissed. "Care to buy your life with a careful and verbose listing of all your wealth, where it can be found, and just how it's guarded?"
"No," Mirt growled, "I'm in a hurry. So stand aside, and I'll let all of ye live."
Coldly mocking laughter gave him reply, and one of the dark elves sneered, "Kind of you, indeed."
"Indeed, but I won't tarry," Mirt growled. "Stand aside, now!"
"Giving us orders, old man?" the drow who'd first spoken responded tartly. "For that, you'll taste a whip!" Slim gloved fingers went eagerly to a thigh sheath.
"Or three," another of the drow agreed, as other hands made the same movement, and slim black tentacles curled and cracked. Mirt sighed, opened his cupped hand to reveal the thing he'd taken from his pouch in the House of the Long Slow Kiss, and murmured a word.
The battered metal chevron in his palm erupted in a ringing, leaping sparkle of steel—and the old moneylender stood calmly watching as the magic he'd unleashed became a

hundred slashing, darting swords that flew about the alley in front of him in a deadly whirlwind. Drow leaped desperately for safety, anywhere it might lie .. . but died anyway amid screams from open windows above. Someone paused on a catwalk to watch—and someone else smote that watcher from behind, contributing a helplessly-plunging, senseless body to the flashing carnage below.

"Enough!" Mirt growled as he watched the unfortunate falling man cut to ribbons. The moneylender spat a second strange word, and the blades obediently melted away, leaving the alley empty of menacing forms in his path. He strode on.

His next few steps were in slippery black blood, but the star-motes still twinkled in the gloom ahead, heading for a sudden, distant flash of spell-light. In its flare Mirt saw many folk gathered to watch something off to the left, crowded together to enjoy—a fight? A duel? Bets were being placed, and the more belligerent were jostling for a better view.

There was another flash, which resolved itself into the blue pinwheel that marked the appearance of someone using an old catch-teleport spell—and out of its heart stumbled Durnan, moving fast. Mirt's old friend was in some sort of ruin, caught in the midst of a spell-duel between—gods blast all!—a beholder, and someone... a mage? Nay, mauve skin—a mind flayer. Ye gods. Hasty business indeed!

"Idiot!" Mirt described Durnan fervently and broke into a trot, feeling in his pouch for some other small salvation or other.

"Hearken, all!" he panted to the uneven stones ahead of him, as his shaggy bulk gathered speed, "and take note. 'Tis the Wheezing Warrior to the rescue—again!"

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Something cold struck the back of his neck and clung. Durnan snarled and chopped at it, even as a pair of black tentacles twined about his blade and pulled, seeking to drag it down.

Durnan slashed out with the dagger in his other hand, trying to free his sword. The chill at the back of his neck was spreading, cold caressing fingers moving along his shoulders. "What, by the bones of the cursed—?" he snarled.
The beholder smiled down at him. "Your memories will be mine first, before I take the tiny candle that you call a mind —and blow it out!"
Durnan rolled his eyes. "You sound like a bad actor trying to impress gawping North Ward nobles!" Then the point of his dagger found the pommel of his sword. He pressed down firmly and hissed a certain word.
The gem in the pommel burst with a tiny blaze of its own— and slowly, in impressive silence, all of the black tentacles faded away. "So much for your spell," the tavernmaster grunted, throwing the dagger hard into the beholder's large, staring central eye.
The world erupted in a roar of pain and fury. The eye tyrant bucked in midair like a wild stallion trying to shake off ropes, shuddered, then rolled over with terrible speed, eyestalks reaching out to transfix Durnan in many fell gazes.
Nothing happened.
"Mystra, grant that my spellshatter last just a trifle longer," Durnan prayed aloud, hands stabbing down to his boots for more daggers. That great mouth was very close now, and the roaring coming from it was shaking the tavernmaster's body. Teeth chattering helplessly, Durnan watched those fangs gape wide...
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Not far away, a black cobweb quivered and seemed to stiffen. Then a hoarse, dusty voice issued from it—a voice that squeaked and hissed from long disuse. "Someone's using a speUshatter," it told the empty darkness of the crypt around it.
Not surprisingly, there was no reply.
After a moment's pause, the cobweb shot forth an arm like the tentacle of a black octopus and plunged it into the stone

of the far wall—as if the tentacle was a mere shadow, able to freely drift through solid things. Then the entire cobweb shifted like a gigantic, ungainly spider and followed the tentacle, sliding into the stones of the crypt wall like a purposeful ghost.

A breath later, the black tentacle emerged from a solid wall in Skullport, wriggling out across an alley and turning to probe up and down the narrow, reeking way as if it had eyes. A rat paused in its gnawings and scuttlings to watch this new, probably edible worm or snake—but sank back down behind a pile of refuse when the tentacle grew swiftly into a spiderlike growth that covered most of the wall. This spiderlike thing then became a flapping black cloak... from which grew the shuffling figure of a robed, cowled man whose eyes gleamed in the darkness as brightly as the rat's own.

The man's robe swished past the cowering rodent as he stepped out of the alley, looked across a blackened, tumbled area of devastation where a building had burned or been blasted apart, and said clearly, "Hmmm."

A beholder was bobbing above a lone human, the mage-light of carelessly-crafted spells streaming around it, but constrained from reaching its human by some invisible shield or other. The spellshatter, no doubt.

"Hmmm," the man said again, and stepped back into the wall, sinking smoothly into the solid stone until only two dark, watchful patches remained to mark where his eyes must be.

Wisely, the rat scuttled silently away. With archwizards, one can never be sure, and Halaster Blackcloak was known to be both one of the most powerful archwizards of all and more than a little erratic in his behavior. He seemed to be settling into the wall to watch whatever was going on in the ruins, but—if one could ever be safe in Skullport—it was better to be safely away from him. Far away from him.

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Asper slid to a stop on a high catwalk and caught at its rail for a moment to catch her breath. It had been a long, hard run, and more than one foolish beast had tried to make her its supper along the way. The blade in her hand was still dark and wet from her last encounter, and the leap from the end of the little-known tunnel—that wound down through the heart of Mount Waterdeep to end in a sheer drop from the ceiling of the cavern that held most of Skullport—down to the dark roofs below was always a throat-tightening thing.
Gasping for air, Mirt's lady tossed her head. Sweat streamed down her face despite her frequent wipings, plastering ash-blonde tresses to her forehead and dripping from the end of her nose. Asper sighed air deep into her lungs, shook her head to hurl away more sweat, clipped the ring on her sword pommel to the matching one at her throat and spun the ribbon around so the gory blade would bounce along at her back as she traveled on. Then she peered out over Skullport, waiting for her breathing to slow.
The deadly place seemed somehow quiet tonight, the mysterious guardian skulls—or whatever they truly were—drifting here and there through the gloom high above the streets, where the stone fangs of the cavern ceiling made a silent forest close overhead. Asper loved this world of flitting bats, occasional screams, and muttered conspiracies. She enjoyed a leisurely prowl among the crumbling roofs' gargoyles, glowing wards, and wrought iron climb-nots, where crossbows waited for thieves to trip their lines.
But this journey had been anything but leisurely. Asper clung to the rail as if it was a lover and peered north. There had been something, a flicker—there!
Spell-light flashed in a place of darkness. Some sort of ruin, it seemed, liberally endowed with rough heaps and pillars of blackened stone. In the second flash Asper saw the unmistakable sphere of a beholder, eyestalks writhing in pain or rage, quivering in the air low above some sort of foe. Probably a man. The sort of trouble Durnan or her beloved

were almost sure to be drawn into.
Asper vaulted lightly over the rail and fell through the cool air, ignoring the oath uttered by a startled face at a window as she passed. Her boots found a second catwalk, slipped for a moment on damp boards as they sank and danced back up under her landing, then held firm. Asper crouched low as the catwalk's tremblings grew gentler, the fingertips of one hand just touching the boards in front of her, and looked again at the beholder. The problem was, Skullport was all too apt to be crawling with this sort of thing. The right sort of strife for Mirt and Durnan to get caught up in, but had they chosen this particular strife, or found amusement elsewhere?
Then her eyes fell on what she'd been searching for, far ahead along the narrow alley that ran from beneath her catwalk to the ruins where the beholder danced. A familiar lurching form, portly where he wasn't burly, shambling and wheezing along with that bluff, fearless unconcern she loved so well. Mirt the Moneylender, the man whose heart drove and carried the Lords of Waterdeep, was lumbering like an ungainly hopping hippo over heaped rubble where the alley emptied out into the general chaos of the ruin—trotting up to an enraged beholder to rescue his friend.
This was their fight, then. Asper frowned, quickly undid her belt, plucked something from behind its buckle, and set it down carefully on the boards beside her. It would not do to be touched by the sort of magic a beholder's eyes could hurl while carrying that little bauble.
She buckled up her belt again, bit her lip in thought, then turned smoothly and ran a little way along the catwalk to where someone bolder than most had strung a line of washing from the high, hanging way to their own balcony. The cord was old and soft where the glowmold that infested these caverns had been washed away many times, but it held one hurrying, catlike woman in leathers long enough for her to reach the balcony. Asper got one boot on the

balcony rail and kicked hard. The aging iron squealed in protest as she sprang away into darkness, fingers straining for the lantern-line she sought.

It was barbed to keep unscrupulous folk from winching down the iron basket of glow-worms that served some fearful merchant as a back door lantern, and the gloves Asper wore ended in middle-finger rings, leaving her fingers and most of her palms bare to grip things unhampered, but she shed only a little blood as she caught hold, swung, and let go again, heading feet first for another catwalk. Her eyes were on the battle ahead.

The eye tyrant seemed to be trying to bite Durnan, who was ducking and rolling among stubby fingers of stone wall. As Asper's feet found the catwalk boards, slid in something unpleasant, and shot her right across it into empty air beyond, she saw the beholder bite down. Blocks of stone crumbled and Durnan dived away, a dagger flashing in his hand. Mirt was getting close now, and beyond them all—as she brought her feet together to crash down through the rotting roof of a bone-cart—Asper could see a few warily-watching creatures, a minotaur and a kenku among them, pointing at him disgustedly and shouting to each other. Wagers were being changed, it seemed.

Then Asper's feet plunged through silk that was gray with age, into brittle bones beyond. She shut her eyes against flying shards as she sank into a crouch, letting her legs take the force of her landing, as a rough male ore's voice snarled, " What by all the brain-boring tentacles of dripping Ilsenine's sycophants was that?"

"Special delivery," Asper told the unseen merchant as her sword flashed out. Silk fell away like cobwebs and she sprang past startled, furious eyes and gleaming tusks onto the street beyond.

"Grmnarrr!" The ore's roar of rage echoed off the buildings around, and Asper dodged sharply toward one side of the alley, bringing her sword up and back behind her without

looking or slowing. A heavy handaxe rang off its tip and rattled along an iron gate beside her. Asper ran on into the darkness, calling back, "Pleasant meeting, bloodtusks!"

The ore term of respect was unlikely to mollify a merchant whose cart-top had just been ruined, but she was in a hurry. Up ahead, the beholder seemed to be shaking the air in a roaring frenzy that far outmatched the snarls of the ore behind her—and rays were lashing out from its writhing, coiling

eyestalks in all directions. Those stabbing down seemed to meet some sort of shield and fade away, and one that lashed out toward Mirt met a similar fate, but others were causing spectacular explosions, bursts of flame and lightning, and in one spot, the stone was melting like syrup and slumping down upon itself in a slow flood.

Magelight flashed and curled around the eye tyrant as it poured forth spells in a display that had the audience scrambling for cover. The shouted latest adjustments to their wagers rang back hollowly from windows, balconies, and behind walls all around as the ground shook. Stone shrieked as it was rent asunder and the last of the ruin's blackened walls toppled, with slow majesty, down onto the struggling tavernmaster.

Dust rose slowly as the heaving underfoot subsided, and the ringing that had risen in Asper's ears was not enough to drown out Mirt's roar of challenge.

"About! Turn about, ye blasted lump of floating suet! I'll look ye in all yer eyes and stare ye down, and there'll be a blade-thrust into every one of 'em before ye'll have time to flee! Turn about, I say!"

Asper winced at her lord's imprudence, even as a rueful smile twisted her lips. This was her Mirt, all right.

Winded by his shouting, the fat old Lord of Waterdeep puffed and wheezed straight at the beholder, old boots flopping as he scrambled up a shifting pile of rubble. At its top he made a show of drawing his stout old sword and

raising it in challenge. "Do ye hear me, ball of offal? I—"
"Hear you quite well enough," the beholder replied. "Be silent forever, fat man." Beams of deadly radiance flashed from its eyes.
They struck something unseen in the air before Mirt with such savage force that the very emptiness darkened, and the fat moneylender staggered to keep his footing as he was thrust back under the weight of the magic that clawed and tore at his shields.
The eye tyrant screamed in rage—was every puling human protected against all his powers?—and lashed out repeatedly with spells and thrusting eye-beams. The ground shook anew and Mirt disappeared down a sliding mound of rubble as stones broke free from buildings all around and plunged to the streets. Asper crouched low to stay unseen and scrambled forward as a balcony broke off a large mansion off to her left and crashed to its iron-gated forecourt, splitting paving stones with cracks like the strikes of a dozen whips.
A stone shard whirled out of nowhere and laid her cheek open with the ease of a slicing razor. Asper hissed at the close call and put a hand up to shield her face, spreading her fingers to see Mirt struggling along like a man battling his way into the face of a gale. Blackness sparked and roiled around him as his shields slowly melted—soon they would surely fail, he'd be blasted to a rain of blood, and she'd lose him, forever.
There was only one way she could help, and it might mean her life. Thrown away vainly, too, if she fouled the lone chance she'd get. Asper swallowed, tossed her head to draw breath and blow errant hairs away from her eyes, and slapped the hilt of her sword so the rune carved there would be smeared with the gore still leaking from her torn fingers. She felt its familiar ridges slick and sticky with her blood and nodded in satisfaction. Turning herself carefully to face the raging eye tyrant, she firmly whispered two words aloud.

The sword shuddered in her hands, then bucked, and she clung to it grimly as the rune's power was unleashed. It blazed away into nothingness as the sword dragged her up into the air and flung her forward, and eerie silence fell.

She was invisible now, she knew, springing up into the air on a one-way vault that would end in a bone-shattering meeting with the cavern wall or a sickening plunge to the ground if she judged wrongly.

The beholder hadn't noticed her. It was still lashing her lord with futile gazes and hurled spells as she rose out of the flashings and trembling air, passing up and over the monster...

Now! The rune's power winked out in obedience to her will and Asper found herself falling, sword first, as Mirt's roars and the excited shouts of the watching Skulkans rushed back around her. Straight down at the curving, segmented body

of the eye tyrant she plunged, headed for just behind the squirming forest of its eyestalks. Asper spread her legs and braced herself for the landing—she'd have only a bare breath to strike before it flung her away.

She'd mixed the stoneclaw sap and creeper gum herself, and spread it on the soles of her boots more thickly than most thieves, miners, and sailors liked it, but it had seen her through more catwalk and rooftop landings on this foray than she cared to think about just now, and if it served her just once more...

Asper's boots struck the beholder's body with solid thumps, and the blade in her hands flashed once and back again before she'd even caught her balance. Almost cut through, an eyestalk flopped and thrashed beside her, spattering her with yellow-green, stinging gore as another eye turned her way—and as her boots found purchase on the curving body plates, Asper lunged desperately, putting her sword tip through the questing eye and shaking violently to drag the steel free before another orb could bathe her in its deadly

gaze.

Three of the deadly eyestalks were turning, like slow serpents, and the beholder was rolling over to fling her off. Asper kicked out at one eye as her balance went, and flailed with her blade at another, ending up falling hard on the bony plates of the monster's body, wrapped around an eyestalk. She clung to it with one hand and drove the quillons of her blade into the questing orb that came curling at her. Milky fluid burst forth, drenching her. Spitting out the reeking slime, Asper grimly slashed at another eye—then she was falling, the beholder's bony bulk no longer under her.

Stones rushed up to meet her, and Asper tucked herself around her sword, trying to roll, but there was no time, and she crashed into what was left of a wall with numbing force, reeling back helplessly with mists swirling in front of her eyes and new wetness on her chin where she'd bitten through her lip.

Mirt was roaring her name and sprinting toward her, arms spread to embrace her. Would his failing shields protect them both?

Not from the death that was now sweeping toward her. The beholder's large central eye was a rent, shriveled ruin, milky liquid dripping from a slash that gaped low in the now-sightless bulge, but the smaller eyes on their stalks glittered with maddened rage as they stared at her, growing swiftly nearer. The charging monster would either ram her into the stones and crush the life from her, or roll over at the last instant to snap at her with its fangs—teeth adorning a jagged mouth quite large enough to swallow her.

Asper shuddered, shook her head to clear it, and raised the gore-streaming blade she still held, as Mirt came gasping up to her, stout sword raised—and the beholder's eyes vanished behind its own bulk, as it rolled over to reveal the gaping maw that would devour her.

A giant among his own kind, and armed with spells that they

lacked, magic enough to overmatch many a human mage, Xuzoun had been contemptuously overconfident. Always a mistake with humans, he vaguely remembered an older tyrant telling him once as they drifted together over a long-ago battlefield where thousands of ores and humans lay trampled and fallen, during a chance meeting after both he and the other had sought the entertainment of watching an ore horde hew its way into oblivion—and had paid dearly. It would take many spells and long, long months in hiding to regain what had been lost in a few moments of red, reaving pain, but first to still the hands that had done this, forever!

Mirt fetched up against her, panting. "Are ye mad, lass? Yon—"

Asper shoved him away, and with the momentum pushing against his shaggy bulk gave her, spun about and dived away, just as Mirt staggered backward and sat down hard on bruising stone with a roar of pain—and the beholder crashed into the stones where they'd stood, snapping and tearing with its teeth.

Rubble sprayed or rolled in all directions as the beholder raked the heap of stone apart, teeth grating on rock. The impact sent it cartwheeling helplessly away through the air and uncovered a battered, unsteadily-reeling tavernmaster.

Durnan found his feet and climbed grimly out of the heaped stones, growling at the pain of several stiffening bruises. He'd been buried long enough to know the first cold touch of despair, and was in a mood to rend beholders.

"Urrrgh," Mirt snarled, waddling awkwardly to his feet. "What's this the earth spits forth? Tavernmasters gone carelessly strolling through Skullport?"

"Well met, old friend," Durnan said with a grin, clapping Mirt on the shoulder with fingers that seemed made of iron.

Mirt's moustache made that overall bristling movement that betokened a smile. "I saw the little minx ye came seeking, sitting as cool as ye please in Bindle's Blade, tossing down amberjack, so I came in haste, knowing ye'd be avidly

hunting down a trap!" He cast a look at the beholder as it thudded into the wall of a stronghouse where pale faces had just vanished from view, and asked, "So what did ye do to get a tyrant mad at ye? Refuse to kiss it?"
"Your wit slides out razor-sharp as always, Old Wolf," Durnan observed, with a sly smile that belied his light, innocent tone.
Mirt gestured rudely in reply. "Well?"
"Nothing," Durnan said flatly as they watched the beholder reel, steady itself, and begin to drift their way, menacingly slow and carefully. "I came out of the Portal to aid a noble lady—and strode straight into a spell that snatched me here." He grinned. "Well, at least it saved me a bit of walking."
Mirt harrumphed. "Pity it didn't do the same for me." Rock shifted behind him and he whirled around, sword out and low—only to relax and smile. "Lass, lass, how many times have I told thee how much I hate being snuck up on from behind?" he chided Asper halfheartedly. She gestured past him with her sword.
"You'd better turn around again, then, my lord," she told him calmly, as a plucking at his belt told him that Durnan had snatched one of his daggers. Mirt grunted like a walrus and heaved himself around, puffing—in time to see the beholder rushing down at them again, beams of reaving light lancing out from its eyes.
"Keep behind me, both of ye!" the fat moneylender roared. "I'm shielded!"
"Against teeth like those? That's a spell you'll have to show me some time!" Durnan said, standing at Mirt's shoulder with a dagger in either fist. He'd lost his blade under all the rocks, and one eye had swollen almost shut, but the tavern-master seemed content—even eager—as death roared at them again.
Asper slid up to stand at Mirt's other shoulder with the ease and fluid grace of a prowling serpent. "It seems strange to

be worrying about a beholder's teeth," she said, "and not its eyes, for once."
"Get back, lass!" Mirt roared. "As I haven't worries enough t—"
Then the beholder crashed into them, snarling and snapping, as they hacked and slashed ineffectually against its bony body plates.
Its hot breath whirled around them as they jumped and hewed vainly and ducked aside, only to be struck and hurled away by what felt like a fast-moving castle wall. Durnan grunted as the tyrant smashed him down onto rocks like a rag doll, then rolled away into a gully as it settled, trying to crush him. Asper could not keep her feet when the jaws reached for her, and slid out of sight beneath the monster, only to duck up again, stab at it, and be thrown end-over-end across the ruins, sword flying from her numbed hands to clang and clatter to its own fall. She fetched up against a broken-off pillar with a gasp and a moan, but Mirt was too busy to hear her.
He was scrambling, cursing, and flailing against persistent fangs, sword ringing off bony plates and fangs alike, and in the end, only managed to avoid losing an arm by setting his sword upright against closing jaws and letting go. The beholder's jaws caught on the blade, bent it, then spat it out.
By then, the three battered, wincing companions were rising out of the rubble in widely scattered spots. Fresh wagers were yelled in the distance.
"Oh, by the way, this is Xuzoun," Durnan said formally, indicating the eye tyrant with a flourish.
"Ill met," Mirt growled, struggling to his feet. "Damned ill met."
Then the faint, everpresent singing that told him his shields yet lived fell silent. Their defense against the beholder's eyes was gone.
"Gods blast it," the old moneylender muttered. "To die in

Skullport, of all places, and win someone's wager for them."
"Keep apart," Asper said warningly, from off to his right, "lest it take us all down at once."
"Cheerful advice," Durnan commented, watching Xuzoun as it turned slowly to survey them all, as yet unaware that no shields remained to foil its magic. "Anyone still have magic to hand?"
"That'll help us against this? Nay," Mirt growled, watching death slowly come for them. All it would take now would be for the beast to lash out with one eye, on a whim, and discover they were defenseless.
Xuzoun had sent forth much magic against these humans, and seen it all boil away harmlessly, or come clawing back to harm its hurler. Lords of Waterdeep were tougher than most mortals, it seemed. How to defeat these two—perhaps three, if the woman was one, too—without destroying their bodies?
The only doppleganger whose loyalty Xuzoun had never found wanting was dead, so preservation of these humans—their bodies, at least—more or less intact was important. They foiled all magic with ease, and there seemed no way to overcome their wills. Yet to flee from battle with them now, before a crowd of Skulkans, galled.
The beholder's advance slowed, then stopped. It rose a prudent distance above the ruin and hung there, considering.
"Right, then, I'm off," Mirt said heartily, turning to go. " 'Tis not beholder-hunting season, anyway, and I've business to see to, that I left—"
One of Xuzoun's eyes flashed, and a stone the size of a gauntleted fist rose from the rubble and flashed toward the old moneylender, flying as hard and as straight as any arrow. These humans might have shields to foil magic, but what if the stone were flying fast enough, and aimed true, when the magic that flung it was stripped away? Turning slowly end over end, the stone shot on...
"Old Wolf—down!" Asper screamed. Mirt had heard that tone

from her a time or two before in his life, and flopped to his belly without delay. The stone whistled past close overhead and shattered with a sharp crack against a wall beyond.
Then the beholder was descending, and at the same time a slab of stone the size of a small cart was rising above Durnan. He ducked away but it followed, lowering itself with care, chasing him. The Master of The Yawning Portal spat out a curse and started a sprinting scramble across the rubble. The beholder seemed to smile as it drifted after him.
If the great weight of the stone pinned the running lord without having to strike him down and do harm, he'd be trapped and helpless—a prisoner until Xuzoun was ready to steal his mind and take over his body. If this worked with the one, why there were stones aplenty here, and only two humans more...
Wheezing to his feet and regarding the stone pursuing Durnan with horror, Mirt was startled by a loud rattling of rocks behind him. He lurched around with a snarl—was one of those watching gamblers trying to change the odds?—and found himself staring at a scaly blue monster that looked like a huge and sinuous crocodile, its head rearing up to regard him as it raced over the broken rubble on a small forest of fast-churning legs.
A behir—a man-eating lizard-thing that could spit lightning bolts!
"Ah, just what we need!" Mirt snarled despairingly, raising his dagger and knowing what a useless little fang it was against such onrushing death. "Some right bastard of a mage must be toying with us!"
Setting himself as a weary bull lowers its head to face into a fast-scudding storm, the fat old Lord of Waterdeep prepared to fight this new foe. The behir opened its jaws impossibly wide as it came, and Mirt was staring into a maw as large as a spacious doorway, a forked tongue wriggling in its depths in a fascinating dance, that plunged at him more swiftly than any man could run.

Asper screamed out Mirt's name and sprinted toward him, a small boot-knife in her hand, but she was too distant to do more than watch as the reptile snapped its jaws once, tilted its head toward Mirt to deliver what he could only describe as a wink, and surged past the astonished moneylender to spit lightning into the open mouth of the beholder.

Xuzoun screamed, a high, sobbing wail like too many cries Mirt had heard human women make, and spun away over the ruins, lightnings playing about its body. Its eyestalks jerked and coiled spasmodically, and it was trailing smoke when it struck a leaning pillar and crashed heavily to the ground. The rushing behir was on it in a breath, coiling over its foe as it snapped its jaws and tore away eyestalks in eager, merciless haste. The three humans watched, a little awed, then in unspoken accord came together in the center of the stony devastation to watch the beholder die.

"Is there any hole here small enough that we can get into it and hold off that thing?" Asper asked softly, watching the scaly blue head toss as it tore away beholder flesh.

None of them saw the crystal sphere materialize silently beside the riven eye tyrant for a moment, flickering with the last vestiges of a spell-glow... then silently crumble to dust, which drifted away.

"A few, no doubt," Durnan replied grimly, watching the carnage, "but none of them would shield us in the slightest from its lightnings."

Asper sighed a long, shuddering sigh and tossed her head. Her eyes were very bright as she said softly, "I thought so," and raised her little knife as if it were some great magical long sword.

When the crocodilelike head turned from its feasting, it saw the little knife, Mirt's dagger beside it, and the similar dagger Durnan held ready, and its eyes flashed golden with amusement. Its maw opened and a hissing roar came out.

The great jaws worked and rippled with effort, and for a

moment Asper thought it was trying to speak. Then it tossed its head in disgust, drew in a deep breath, and tried again, turning its eyes on Mirt. They all heard its rattling roar quite distinctly: "Thank TYanstraaaa..."

Then it lowered its head, folded its legs against its body, and slithered away. They watched it wind its snakelike way out of the ruins into the street beyond, where the audience of surviving gamblers shrank back to make way for it, and vanish around a corner—Spidersilk Lane, Durnan thought—and leave them alone with a torn-open, quite dead beholder.

"I wonder what she'll ask you in payment?" Durnan asked the Old Wolf.

Mirt growled a wordless reply, shrugged, then turned to his lady as if seeing her for the first time. "Hello, little fruit-basket," he leered, extending his lips in a chimplike pout to be kissed.

Slowly, Asper stuck her tongue out in eloquent reply, and made the spitting-to-the-side mime that young Waterdhavian ladies use to signal disgust or emphatic disapproval.

Then she winked and grinned.

Mirt started to grin back, but it faded quickly as he saw the danger signal of Asper's eyebrows rising, and the accompanying glitter in the dark eyes boring into him. A moment later she asked softly, "Just who is this 'Transtraaaa' woman, anyway?"

Mirt gave her a sour look. "Pull in the claws, little one. She's no woman, but a lamia noble."

It was the turn of Durnan's eyebrows to rise. "Slave-trading, Mirt?"

The fat moneylender gave him a disgusted look and turned to start the long trudge back up the alley. "Ye know me better than that," he rumbled. "Slaving's work for those who've no scruples, less sense, and too much wealth. Nobles, for instance."

Durnan groaned. "Let's not start that one again. We rooted

out all we could find and Khel set spy-spells. There'll always be a few dabblers, no doubt, but nothing we can't handle—"
Lightning roared across the ruins to split the stones at his feet.
"Oh? Care to try to handle me, tavernmaster?"
That taunt echoed and rolled around them, made louder by magic. It had been delivered in the voice of an arrogant young woman of culture and breeding. The three Lords looked up whence the lightning had come and saw a lone figure standing on the catwalk where Asper had inspected a line of washing not so long ago: a slim, haughty figure in a dark green cloak whose folds showed the shape of a long sword beneath it. The uppermost part of the figure was all flashing eyes and curling auburn hair piled high around graceful shoulders.
"Young Nythyx," Mirt roared, "come down from there!"
In reply, two gloved hands parted the cloak from within to reveal the glowing, deadly things they bore: Netherese blast scepters, crackling with simmering lightnings. "Come up and get me, fat man." Nythyx Thunderstaff sneered. "I don't take orders from drunken old commoners."
Durnan looked up at her, eyes narrowing. "You a slaver, then?" He strode calmly toward the mouth of the alley, and after a moment Mirt and Asper followed.
The scepters were leveled at them, and the young woman who held them shrugged and said almost defiantly, "Yes."
Durnan kept on walking, but shook his head in smiling disbelief. "You've never shackled men or dragged ores out of carry-cages. If you tried, they'd toss you around like a child's ball!"
Lightning stabbed at him in wordless, deadly reply.
An unclad woman whose hair and eyes shared the color of leaping flame leaned out of a window near the alley-mouth and stiffened. "Blast scepters!" she hissed, and as her eyes blazed even brighter, she flowed forward out of the window. Her body was human to the hips, but from there down it was

the scaled, sinuous bulk of a serpent. She slithered along the wall, drawing herself upright, and raised her hands to weave a spell, but a dark, chill hand caught at her shoulder.
She spun about, hands growing talons with lightning speed. "Who—?"
"I am sometimes called Halaster Blackcloak," the wall told her, ere a cowled face melted out of its stones to join the arm that held her. Flame-red eyes met dark ones, and after a moment Transtra shivered and looked away. The hand released its hold on her, and Halaster's voice was almost kindly as he added, "They'll be fine. Watch. Just watch."
O- ¦&¦
Lightning spat down at the tavernmaster, slashing aside glow-lanterns and washing, but Durnan calmly leaped aside, rolled to his feet, and resumed his steady walk a dozen paces ahead and to the left of where he'd been walking. He looked up through smoking rags and swaying ropes and remarked, "Ah. You cooked every slave who said something you didn't like, eh? This may be one reason why we've never heard of your stellar slaving career."
Lightning cracked again, and in its wake the young noblewoman shrieked, "Don't you dare mock me, tavernmaster! My master would have killed you, all of you, if it hadn't been for that—that snake-thing! You're very lucky to be alive to toss smart words my way right now!"
"Ye really should practice with that toy," Mirt growled, waggling one large and hairy finger her way, "if ye harbor any fond hopes of ever hitting someone with it."
At his shoulder, Asper frowned. "You served . . . the beholder?" she asked the woman aloft.
They were close enough now to clearly see Nythyx Thunderstaff s slim lips draw into a tight line. She stared down at them, pale and trembling with rage, and said, "Yes. With Xuzoun, I wielded power and influence. Great lords poured me their best wines in hopes of gaining just the slaves they desired. You've ended that, you three, and will pay for doing

so. This I swear."
"I've heard of consorts fathers disapprove of," Mirt rumbled, "but lass, lass, how could ye be so foolish?"
"Foolish?" Nythyx shrieked, thrusting forth her scepters to point almost straight down at their upturned faces. "Foolish? Who's the fool here, Old Wolf?" And she triggered both blast scepters with a snarl.
But Asper had been muttering something under her breath —and at that moment the catwalk bucked and broke
apart as the blast star she'd left behind on it obediently exploded.
"Ye are, if ye know no better than to let us walk right up when ye had the power to torch us all," Mirt told Nythyx, as the young noblewoman tumbled helplessly down to the cobbles at their feet, futile lightnings sputtering forth to scorch the buildings on either side but finding no way to slow her killing fall.
Or almost fatal fall. A scant few feet above the stones Durnan rushed forward, leaped high to meet her, and cradled her deftly in his arms, crashing down into a crouch that took the force of her descent.
Nythyx stared at him for one astonished moment, then her face twisted and she raised the one scepter she'd managed to hang on to, aiming at his face—so the tavernmaster brought one expert fist down across her chin in a swipe that left her slack-jawed and senseless. Durnan watched the winking and sputtering scepter fall slowly from her hand. When it clattered on the cobbles, he kicked it to Asper, looked at the now-empty face of the woman in his arms for a moment, then swung her onto his shoulder for the long carry back to her father's arms in Waterdeep. Just what, he wondered, was he going to tell Lord Thunderstaff...?
Rubies caught his eyes as her long, ostentatious earrings dangled down beside his chest. Durnan stared at them, shook his head, and said wearily, "I'm getting too old for this. Wfcafaday!"

Mirt shrugged as one of his arms found its way around Asper's shoulders. "Eh? What say ye? 'Twas a bit of a slow day in Skullport, I'd say!"

The words had scarce left his mouth when the front of a nearby building burst out into the alley with a flash and roar, shattering shutters across the way and sending another catwalk into dancing collapse. Flashing fingers of blue-white fire spat from the curling smokes of the riven building even before the flung stones of its walls had finished falling, and on those fiery fingers were borne two writhing bodies.

The three Lords of Waterdeep watched the pair struggling vainly against the magic. They were women of greater age and

far more lush beauty than either Asper or Nythyx—beauty revealed through the tatters of their smouldering robes as they shrieked and wailed past the three lords, pulled in a sharp curve along the front of a butcher shop and on down the alley by the raging magic that held them captive.

The lords turned to watch, in time to see a black flame rise suddenly into being along one wall partway down the alley: a dancing shadow without fuel or heat that seemed neither to die nor rise higher, but merely to continue.

From behind its concealing veil, Transtra watched a shadowy hand rise from the cobbles behind Mirt's boot, deftly close on the second, forgotten blast scepter which lay fallen and still sparking feebly on the cobbles, and draw it down through the solid stone.

A moment later, the hand reappeared beside her and offered her the scepter. "You see? Patience does bring rewards," Halaster murmured, as the lamia noble looked at him in wonderment, then at the scepter, and slowly stretched forth her hand for it. The wizard smiled thinly. "There's no trap; take it."

Transtra regarded him, eyes unreadable. "Why have you given me this?"

Eyes as black as a starless night looked back into hers. "I

have few friends, lady, and I'd like to gain another—as you gained yonder moneylender."
Transtra looked at the two sorceresses clawing and sobbing against the unknown magic carrying them inexorably down the alley, drew in a deep breath, then looked back at Halaster and stretched forth her other hand.
"I'm willing to gain one, too," she said steadily, and the smile that answered her was like a wave of warm spiced wine that carried her along unresisting when the wizard replied, "Then trust me, and come."
Cool black fingers closed on hers, and drew her toward the wall, into the chill embrace pf the stones. Transtra swallowed, closed her eyes, and kept firm hold of the fingers that took her on, into silence, away from the alley...
The black flame along one side pf the alley was suddenly gone as if it had never been, revealing a dirty stone wall broken by one dark, open window. As the two struggling sorceresses flew past that spot, their splendid bodies wriggled, lengthened, and turned warty and green.
"Trolls?" Asper asked, frowning, and her two companions nodded. The forcibly transformed women plunged across the ruins into darkness, tumbling in the grip of the magic that propelled them. A moment later, on the far side of the great cavern whence they'd gone, two gigantic orbs blazed open and a thunderous voice rumbled, "Who dares—?"
There followed the rumblings and slight shakings of even so large a cavern as this that marked the stirring of a huge, long-quiescent body. Something larger than several buildings rose up on the far side of the ruins.
As the black dragon raised its scaly bulk higher than the roofs of Skullport to glare down the alley, Asper whispered something over the Netherese scepter. A nimbus of blue-and-gold fire surrounded her hand. "Touch me, both of you," she said, "and bring the not-so-noble lady's hand against mine."
Durnan touched Nythyx's limp hand to Asper's, and she

whispered something. The scepter began to whine and pulse, brighter at each flare.
"What have ye done, lass?" Mirt rumbled.
"Used this thing to power the little carry-stone you gave me, so as to whisk us all back to Mirt's mansion," she replied—and as she spoke, the familiar blue mists of teleportation began to rise and swirl around them. Asper smiled and turned her head to face Durnan. "I must agree with my lord," she said sweetly to the tavernmaster. "A slow day, in truth."
"May there be many more of them," Durnan breathed his heartfelt wish as the dragon's charge made the stony pave of the alley buckle and heave under their boots, and the mists rushed up to claim them, spinning them back to a place where there'd be a fire and a warm bathing pool, ready wine ... and no dragons. What more could a retired adventurer ask for?
Introduction
BLOOPBOUND
In much of fantasy fiction, it seems, destinies (when set by mortals, at least, rather than all-knowing gods) are things best escaped from.
This tale begins on the twenty-fifth of Flamerule, in the Year of the Prince (1357DR), at the same time the events chronicled in Hand of Fire are unfolding elsewhere in Faerun. It concerns a very different female from Shandril, but one who has all too similar problems.
It also gives us a look inside the tower of a Red Wizard ofThay, of whom Volo once said: "All wizards are dangerous. Even me. Most wizards develop characters politely described as 'difficult' Then there are the out-and-out nasty bastards, a club in which the Red Wizards are proud and enthusiastic members."
The main character in "Bloodhound" is about to discover what Red Wizard nastiness really is, and a little about the perils of destinies and of running from them.

BLOODBOUNP

It had taken the Master's little flying eyes half the day to find her.

Tace tried not to smile into their reproving glares as she uncurled herself from the shaded corner she'd found, where the bases of two stone wind-spikes sprouted from one end of a tower balcony. The eyes hovered right in front of her face, angry and unblinking. She tucked the two curved pieces of glass she'd been peering through to magnify distant things —scraps purloined from the floor of the Master's workchamber—into one of the many pockets of her dusty, clinging leathers, stretched, and murmured, "I come, Master."

The breeze hissed past her ears as Tace ran lightly along the balcony and sprang into the air at its far end, leaping across emptiness some hundreds of feet above the dusty stone courtyard that ringed

the tower to the round brass window she'd left open. She knew it was sturdy enough to take the weight of Maelarkh Throon's youngest and most slender house slave. Catching its swing-bar with deft fingers, Tace pulled hard, swinging herself feet-first back into Ironwind Tower.

A last, wild glimpse of sun-drenched, rocky Thayan highlands flashed past her gaze, then she was landing on the smooth tiles hard enough to bruise her feet in her soft shoes, but bouncing forward to—

Feel fingers as cold and hard as iron dig into her shoulder.

"Tantaraze," Old Sameera said in slow, scandalized outrage, "work is not to be hidden or run from. Slaves live to work. Slaves who do not work do not continue to live!" Old, iron-taloned fingers shook Tace like a dusty cloak.

"This," Sameera snarled, "you know full well, wherefore my words are wasted, so I'll let my goad speak for me and just say this: Run to the master, who awaits in his spellchamber! Run just as fast as you can!"

Tace sprang forward in a wild leap the moment Sameera's grip loosened, but she knew the red fire of the goad's barbed lashes would crack down her back and behind before she could get quite clear—and they did, sending her staggering. Sameera had been flogging slaves for a long, long time.

The slavemother's satisfied hiss followed her around the first bend of the passage, the bend that hid the rude "dig my dung" gesture Tace made back at Sameera, and also hid her shoulder-wrigglings to loosen and soothe the goad-fire.

Not from the Master, of course. The flying eyes were darting along by her shoulders as Tace raced. Like a quiet little wind she ran, ducking low at every turn and leaning so close to the crimson and goldglimmer wall hangings that they rippled with the haste of her passage.

She feared the Master, of course, and in a curious way, although she knew full well that she could die at his whim and that he was by far the most dangerous and powerful person in his tower, she also liked him.

More than that: He liked her... or at least was amused by her, and let her tease him, just a little, or betimes steal a sweet tart from the hearthside platters without informing Sameera.

And Tace knew his hot-eyed guards did not touch her, for all her youth, because—and only because—the Master had ordered it so.

Fire flared from some of the rippling goldglimmer as she raced closer to the spellchamber, and the razor-jawed heads of tiny dragons curled forth from the hangings to snap and dart barb-tipped, poisoned tongues at her. Tace avoided them almost scornfully, hurling herself into a roll at one point so as not to slow her storm wind pace. Maelarkh Throon was, after all, a Red Wizard of Thay, and as the saying went, "Death comes for all who cross a Red Wizard, or dare to keep one waiting."

The doors rolled back into mists at her approach, so Tan-taraze bounded, somersaulted, and sprang forward high and

wild into a lasting, racing roll that brought her to the very feet of her Master. There she threw herself to the gilded mosaic tiles, lips to his slipper and branded bottom thrust high for chastisement, as she'd seen his pleasure-lasses do when they'd done something to set them weeping with fear and left his face dark with anger.

Maelarkh Throon chuckled above her, then asked almost gently, "And do you truly think there is any place in my tower you can hide from me. Little Dancing Spider?"

"No, Master. Your magic sees all and commands all. Moreover, I am bound to you by something almost as powerful."

"Oh?" The wizard's voice went soft, and Tace knew that what she said next was very important.

"By my love for you, Master. Wherefore I would never try to hide from you."

"Prettily said, my Swiftfalcon. Very prettily. Almost you sound like a rarautha." A courtesan. Well, Tace had no interest in mixing dusted-gold scents to go beneath her breasts and wherever her limbs bent, nor in wearing elaborately-filigreed, pierced, and upwired gowns with chime-bells or without. Nor did balancing full goblets on her breasts and undulating across a room to piping music seem more alluring than ridiculous, but she could dance for her Master, if that's what he wanted.

"Though your nether end is pleasant enough, I grow tired of addressing it. Rise, Little Imp, and look at me."

Tace obeyed as gracefully as she knew how, surging up to her feet to stand with hands clasped behind her, as Sameera had taught her.

Tall and handsome as ever, the Master was smiling at her. She dared to smile back.

Though he was said to be a powerful Red Wizard, Mae-larkh Throon never wore red. Whenever Taze had seen him, he'd always been clad in black boots or slippers and sweeping black robes with tight sleeves and cutaways that left his

bronzen chest, with its tattoos and many talismans on fine gold chains, bare. That's what he was wearing now as he towered over her, whatever magic he'd been doing with the Vaedren just finished or momentarily left incomplete. Its gems winking and gleaming, the wristlet floated behind the Master, spinning slowly in midair as it floated above a slender pedestal Tace had never seen before, with spell-smokes curling around it.

Slender and agile, the Master of Ironwind Tower cut a striking figure. Everything about him was alert, awake, and sharp.

His hair was jet black, its edges cut into dagger-sharp swashes and points and its flow brushed straight back and kept that way with sarradder oil. As usual, Tace could smell the quace and lemons of that oil from this close. Throon's forehead was high, his eyes very large and a deep, striking golden in hue, like those of a falcon, and the brows above them were fierce, tufted into points. His black beard curved into its usual blade-sharp point, and his ring-adorned fingers were long and thin. His fingernails had been cut to razor-points in the manner affected by many Red Wizards to show that they need not sully their hands with work and, Tace had overheard Rauksoun say once, to arm themselves with deadly painted-on poisons with which to doom a foe with a mere scratch.

He tossed his head as if aware of the awe in her scrutiny, and strode toward the arch that led into the next tharm, the golden threads of the warding-sigils woven into its curtain flaring briefly at his approach. "Come, Little Imp."

The Vaedren drifted after the wizard and Tace scampered right behind it, knowing the curtains that could kill would draw aside for it and let her into the Master's library.

Tall and bronzen, black robes swirling, Maelarkh Throon swept into the tharm both he and his youngest house slave loved the most, of all the grandtharms in Ironwind Tower.

Its shelves rose like so many pillars, guardian spells

crackling unseen before the wizard's pacings. Rows of mauve, dark purple, and darker green fabric spines, as soft as fur, met Tace's eager gaze, but the shelves hid the metal corners and clasps she knew each book sported.

Most of the tomes were tall and narrow rectangles, their pages of spell-hardened hide guarded with metallic ink glyphs. The Master had once indulgently told Tace that those glyphs were meaningless writings—poetry, quotations, or just gibberish—inked over the real contents of each book. The glyphs would turn invisible for a time if touched while the right word was spoken, or by a finger wearing the correct enspelled ring. If a glyph was touched otherwise, its magic would slay. Some of the glyphs did other things to those disturbing them, though the Master never specified just what.

Maelarkh Throon drew on the special glowing gloves he always wore to handle books and selected one of his most valued tomes.

Even if he hadn't handled it so reverently, Tace knew how much he treasured it by its intricate lock, and because its pages were of polished electrum, the writings etched and stamped therein, with illustrations cut with acids to yield iridescent hues.

It was a book she'd seen before, not so long ago, when—

"You, Little Imp," the Master said gently, "took the opportunity to hang head-downward from above yon window arch two days back, and tried to read this tome while I had it open. Yes, I did see you. Now tell me. When you gazed on these pages, what did you see?"

Standing facing him, Tace licked her lips and knew by the warm rushing feeling in her face that she was blushing, but wasted no time with half-truths. "Runes I could not read, Master. They twisted as I looked at them, as they always do, and—"

"Ah. As they always do.' My Swiftfalcon, am I going to have to have you blinded? Or just flogged raw?"

Tace trembled, and the wizard waved a dismissive hand between them and said, "No such nonsense. Not this time. Say more. The runes twisted and—?"
"N-nothing, Master. I could not read them. They gave me a head-pain and forced my eyes away to... look at other things."
The wizard nodded. "Yet you stayed up there, Little Imp. Did you try to look at the pages again?" "I—I did."
"And then?" he asked swiftly.
Tace shrugged. "I felt. . . warm. Like there was a fire in my head. I saw things, like windows opening in darkness, but they all faded right away, before I could really see anything."
"Ah," was all the Master said then, and turned away.
He waved a hand, and there was a sudden fire in Tace's forehead and her right buttock, where her brands were—a fire to match the small flame dancing above the back of the Red Wizard's hand.
Flames that, as she watched, took on the shape of her brands: a "Z" with outward-pointing arrows of flame floating above and below its two crossbars.
She was burning...
She bit her lip and trembled with the pain, staring at the dancing reflections on the Master's bronze skin, striving to remain still and silent as sweat drenched her and ... the flames died away.
The pain faded with them, and he closed the book, nodding as if that brief magic had told him something, and put it back in its place.
Then he drew off his gloves, leaving them on his lectern. Their g\aws flowed down over the lectern and became invisible, leaving them just... gloves.
Tace knew that he needed them to handle most of the books because of the talisman he never took off—except in
the spellchamber. That little star next to his skin made things of metal fall right through him, which was why almost

every drinking-goblet, bowl, spoon, fork, or knife in Ironwind was not of metal, but of carved bone or fire-hardened, worked wood.
Smiling faintly, the Master came toward her.
"M-master," she whispered, fear rising to become a cold flame in her every bit as searing as the heat of his magic had been, "I—I—"
"Hush, Little Imp," he said softly. "I come not to punish, but to learn truth. Stand very still."
He loomed over her, closer than he'd ever been. Tace could smell him, a dusky scent mingled with the familiar hair-oil. Above her trembling head, the wizard murmured something.
Then, without warning, he thrust two of his long fingers up her nostrils. They reeked of spicy smoke and Tace almost choked.
His other hand was suddenly a claw around the back of her neck, holding her against his probing fingers, not letting her pull away . . . and something like blue-white fire, only gurgling like rainstorm water gouting out of an Ironwind waterspout, was racing through her head.
She screamed, or thought she did, as the library swam and tilted around her.
As if someone had heard her, golden radiance blossomed in the soft gloom of the library as warding-spells parted and their curtain with them—and Varlbit, her Master's younger apprentice, was striding through them with a message scroll in his hands and a puzzled frown on his face.
His eyes fixed on her and widened—then Tace was stumbling as the Master turned to face his arriving apprentice.
Who gaped at him and blurted, "I-Is this not a good time, Master? Should I return later?"
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"So, Sir Zhent," Storm said in a voice as cold as the steel against his throat, "you will make demands of me in my own cucumber patch now, is that it?"
The warrior felt the cold prickling of his own enchanted

steel, choking him as he tried to swallow.
Fear, rage, and incredulity warred and wrestled in him: This woman should not have the strength to hold him back! The magic on his blade should slice her weavings like cobwebs—else that snakeguts priest of Shar had lied to him!
Lied.
Well, of course.
"Have you any last words?" the Bard of Shadowdale murmured, her hand tightening around his neck. Steel to slice his throat in front, her fingers like stone talons behind ...
Whimpering, the Zhentarim shuddered in her grasp, teeth chattering.
"Can you give me good reason not to end all your deeds now? " she asked softly, her blood still running down her breast in streams from the slashes he'd dealt her at his first strike.
Nuthland of the Zhentarim met her eyes almost pleadingly, and managed to firmly shake his head. "N-no," he managed to gasp. "At least I can speak truth to you... Lady. Let it be quick, if you can find any mercy."
"That much," Storm Silverhand said softly, "and more." She flung the blade of Shar high into the air and watched it dissolve in a flurry of blue stars and flames as the waiting spirits of Mystra and Azuth savaged it together. "No steel shall shed your blood."
Her fingers tightened and his neck broke with a wet crunch. His head lolled, eyes going dark.
Wearily the lady bard embraced the body, calling up the sacred silver fire to sear away any contingencies or death-magics that might have been cast on the Zhent slayer to endanger her or Shadowdale around her.
Her blood snarled and scorched up into sickening blue fire as those flames did their work. Storm clenched her teeth against brief agony, then flung her head back and gasped in relief as it slowly died, leaving her clutching a cooked,

smoking, claw-fingered corpse.
Someone cleared their throat behind her, nervously.
Storm whirled around, her smock ashes upon her and the Zhentarim literally crumbling in her grasp. She gazed into the face of Sorele, the egg-seller from Thorm Arthauvin's farm up the road, with a full basket of great brown freshlaid.
The plump little maid was trembling in... fear? Awe?
Sorele stared wide-eyed at the skull-like, flopping face of the Zhent, then backed up at Storm's frown, and grinned weakly. "Is this not a good time, Lady? Should I come back later?"
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At the sound of their voices, Tantaraze froze, or tried to. Her shudderings, however, refused to stop.
The Master had done no more to her but dismiss her curtly, but his magic had left her numb and tingling, trembling uncontrollably on the verge of a helpless flood of tears.
She'd fled through the tower like the wild wind she was, seeking one of her best hiding places. She was sweating so hard on that run that her bare feet kept slipping and she'd nearly tumbled to her death getting out a particular window and up onto the roof above.
Nearly.
Now she was wedged comfortably in the largest roof downspout, its smooth, shaded stone close and reassuring around her. Bone dry of course, after days of drought. Tace huddled in it, trembling and shuddering. It was that spell. It was doing something to her .. . still doing something to her, long after the Master had ended it, taken his scroll, and started talking to Varlbit.
Varlbit was talking now, not with the Master, but with the Master's oldest apprentice, Rauksoun.
Tace hated them both, but where Varlbit was merely vicious, the not-yet-Red-Wizard Rauksoun was ... a cold, patient blade awaiting a chance to slay his Master and take all Ironwind for himself.
The Master knew it, of course, and his smile was especially

soft when he talked with Rauksoun, but—
What had he done to her? Oh, she belonged to Maelarkh Throon, and he could cook and eat her on a whim if he wanted to. Twasn't that. She liked him, knew he liked her and also knew from slave-talk that most others in Thay had it far worse, but... this magic had awakened something that Tace was sure the Master hadn't noticed or intended.
Something she'd best keep hidden from him and from his apprentices, too.
They must be in the chamber just beside her, the buzzard-cote at the very top of this westernmost side-spire. But what would those two highnoses be doing in such a cramped, dung-stinking place?
"He'll be at least another bell working that spell! We have that long."
Varlbit's voice held anger, and he was panting almost as hard as Tace was. She threw her head back and fought to slow her breathing, trying hard to be quieter.
"So talk," Rauksoun murmured calmly.
"That little klareen Tantaraze! She was in the library with Throon just now, and had somehow convinced him to mind-bond with her! She's trying to ensorcel him!"
"Calm yourself, Varl." Tace could hear the superior smile in Rauksoun's voice. "I know better—andyoK should."
The tingling in Tace became a momentary jab of pain—someone had worked a spell, very close by—then died away almost to nothing. There came a flash of radiance through a chink in the downspout stonework, a glow that did not fade.
Tace peered through the tiny hole and found herself staring at—herself. Or rather, a glowing image of herself, floating in the empty air outside the low arched windows of the cote. Standing upright, looking just as she did in the Tower mirrors—and revolving slowly to show both back and front.
Bare, of course, as she always was. Dusky skin, bony slim, with all her ribs showing and her hip bones sticking out like wings. Long, long legs; large red-brown eyes; copper hued

hair cut short to show the Master's brand on her forehead, the same brand as she wore on the right cheek of her behind ... aye, there. And when she grew older and her head was shaved, would also wear it on her back and face—the right cheek, again...

" 'Swiftfalcon,' he calls her, or 'Imp,' or 'Little Dancing Spider.' Worry not, Varl: she's his plaything, not his lover. Fleet of foot, full of too much mischief and even more curiosity... could turn into a good sneak-thief, yes. And you know as well as I do that she has too smart a tongue in her head for any slave."

"Exactly! What's so special about her? That's what I want t —"'

"And you shall. Varl, Throon purchased this Tantaraze when she was a pewling babe. He bought her because his spells showed him she had a natural aptitude for magic."

"A sorceress! But of course! Don't you see? She'll be his lover, his bride, inherit his Art instead of us—"

"Varl, be still. Look at her! She's no particular prize right now, and could have grown up to be the ugliest sow this side of far Calimshan! Throon could have his pick of sevenscore spell-witches at any MageFair, right? Yes?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"But nothing. Listen and learn. Now, this little Tace has been trained to be a 'fetch this, hold this, keep quiet about this' servant, and told this sort of service will continue if she doesn't misbehave enough to be slain, maimed, turned into an experiment, tossed out of Ironwind to fend for herself, or just sold."

"Yes," Varlbit said, a little sullenly. "And so?" "And so everything changes when her moonbleeds begin. It always does." "Yes, but—"

"Yes but Throon has had a fate in mind for this one since he bought her! She's going to be 'bloodhound' to him."

"And taught magic as his apprentice, hrast it!"

"True, but not as we're taught magic. Varl, don't you know

what bloodbinding is? She'll be an utter mind-slave. Throon will be able to 'ride her mind,' sharing her thoughts and controlling her body at will, whenever he desires."
Tace stiffened, suddenly as cold as the winter winds. So that was why Sameera had been watching her so closely, and sniffing at her.
Oh, gods! She had to get out of here, away from Ironwind! She had to take herself to where the Master could never find her!
But where? By all the Watching Gods, where?
She clawed her way up out of the downspout in silent haste, so frantically that her fingertips left bloody smudges on the stones. She was trembling again, shaking like a banner snatched by a rising wind.
Across many roofs rose another side-spire of Ironwind, and Little Trapped Tantaraze raced toward it, scrambling up and around and over, going to where she could perch and think.
Or try to think of what she could not see just now: a way out.
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"But enough of that scrawny little doomed one," Rauksoun said dismissively, spell-floating on his belly above the dung. "She's nothing, but there are some important things you should know."
Varlbit licked dry lips. "What things?"
"Do you know what the Vaedren truly is?"
"Some sort of beast, spell trapped inside that wristlet. It gives the thing sentience, limited, I think, but enough to control the power-gems Throon has been enspelling. He's trying to augment it right now."
Rauksoun nodded. "You've read the right books. Good. I don't know what manner of creature a 'Vaedren' is, or was, but I doubt it matters anymore. Throon devised the wristlet himself and it's been his portal passkey for years. This last season, though, he seems to have fallen in love with the thing."

"Meaning?"
Rauksoun shrugged. "He's getting restless, perhaps?" "No," Varlbit snapped, "I mean, fallen in love with it how?"
"Ah. All it used to do was allow its bearer to sense nearby portals and to make them operate safely, without knowing their specifics, but these last few months he's given up just storing spells in its gems and started infusing it with additional powers."
"How do you know this?"
"I keep my eyes open, Varl, and my brain working—little things you should have mastered years ago."
The younger apprentice hissed in anger, but said only, "Suppose you tell me what you've so keenly seen and reasoned about these 'additional powers,' then."
"Throon's worried about what might happen to him if an unfamiliar portal takes him to a place of great danger or hostility—a frigid ice waste, say, or somewhere unknown in the Underdark, or the depths of the sea. To protect himself against such places, he's been trying to augment the Vaedren to enable him to take the shape of certain formidable beasts."
"The monsters he's been summoning and slaying?" "Those very beasts, yes."
Varlbit studied the older apprentice, eyes narrowing. "We've always been something of rivals, Rauk. So why are you telling me this?"
"Because I'm worried about the skins of everyone in Ironwind Tower. The Master isn't training either of us swiftly enough, and never instructs those new so-called 'prentices at all! Old Tharlund just shuffles down to them with our old workbooks and leaves them to try those spells on their own! Throon spends all of his time cooing over the Vaedren, when he should be crafting deathwhirls by the dozen, so we'll both have something to hurl when the attacks come!"
"Attacks?"
"Varl, are you stone-blind and brainless? Who do you think

Throon's greatest rival is?"
"Oh. Rundarvas Thaael, of course."
"Brilliant. Astoundingly perceptive. Wonderful! So, have you spent a single spell farscrying Thaaeltor this last, say, year or so?"
"You know I haven't," Varl said grimly. "What're they up to?"
"I don't know, because Thaael has trebled his wards and thrown up spellscreens and linked guardian beasts to them, so my every probe gets me a mooncalf—or worse—coming for me, right back down the line of my spell! Now, doesn't that worry you?"
Varl swallowed. "Y-yes. Thaael swore to slay the Master 'soon,' and that was a year ago."
"Indeed," Rauksoun agreed bitterly. "And right now, as we float here whispering at each other, Maelarkh Throon is down in that spellchamber gaining darkvision—darkvision!—for his precious Vaedren, when he should be arming Ironwind Tower!"
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The portal flashed, purple radiance flickering over Maelarkh Throon's face. He smiled, hands still raised in the last gesture of his spell, and watched it flash again. There...
Down a long spiral of crawling purple lightnings it was coming, racing at him out of the depths of his portal, ensnared by his reaching spell from the cold lightlessness of the Underdark and snatched here, right into—
His ready spellweb, flaring now into fiery life as the lurker plunged into it, beating its great stonelike flaps furiously, writhing like a netted manta ray. Doomed already.
He would have its darkvision, its flight, and the stonelike appearance of its hide, in that order. He murmured the word that linked him with the spellweb so he could set it to work—and start feeding...
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"He's drunk on sucking that beast dry," a coldly gloating voice observed, "and sees nothing else." "Is our time come

at last, Master?" "It is. You know what to do."
The apprentice nodded, swallowed, and carefully began a much-practiced spell.
Rundarvas Thaael smiled and waved his second apprentice forward. And his third, fourth, and fifth. There were many portals to subvert and alter, and such things took time. Hasty work is always sloppy work.
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The wristlet glowed warmly against his skin. Throon smiled and reached with his mind into its familiar surging glows, seeking flight...
And finding it. Ahhh.
As the Master of Ironwind Tower settled gently down onto the stones at the far end of his spellchamber, some of the magics of the spellweb started to sing eerily.
He frowned. No power surge should—
But no matter. 'Twould be the work of but moments to sweep those spells into smooth dissolution, using the Vae-dren to drink their roilings and prevent a hundred-odd small magics through Ironwind from being shattered or twisted into unstable untrustworthiness, then—
[brightflash]
Faerun exploded raw around him.
"Yes!" Thaael exulted and without pausing a moment, snapped, "Now, don't stop to watch your work. Twill be many, many breaths ere you'll be able to see anything useful anyway, after a portal-blast!"
He strode excitedly across a room alive with the surging sparks of aroused Art, his paunch wobbling. "We overwhelmed it very handily, so Throon's stunned or worse, but his wards are probably triggering already."
Stopping beside the rays of thrumming white light that were stabbing from every fingertip of his most competent apprentice, he gestured grandly at that unfolding magic.
"Behold. Join to Ahraul's spell, now, all of you. Yon portal is Throon's weakest. It must be forced wide, and the beast

thrust through! Then we'll see blood wash the walls of Iron-wind Tower!"
Maelarkh Throon screamed, or thought he did, in the white blinding dazzle that was all he could see.
There was still smooth stone under his boots, but otherwise he might just as well have been staggering through the heart of a fire that neither seared nor cooked, but brought him utter silence and nothing to see but an endless white void.
A strange discordant sound rose out of nowhere, swimming and warbling eerily to draw seemingly louder and nearer, and reveal itself as several excited men's voices chanting incantations. The words, like the voices, were unfamiliar, but that cadence was unmistakable, and Throon could judge from syllables that the unseen chanters were working a spell together that had something to do with portals...
Haularake! He had to see!
He tried to work one of the most powerful spells he knew—one of the most prized secrets of the senior Red Wizards—to return his body to what it had been before the blast. Tamtornar's Rendever snuffed out great handcounts of spells from memory in an instant and succeeded only slightly more often than it failed, but now, as always when a desperate mage tried it, it could mean the difference between oblivion and survival.
His unheard tongue seemed made of thick mud, and his unseen fingers were both numb and heavy ... the spell... could he... by all the...
The Vaedren! If he called on the Rendever stored within it—
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The impenetrable pearly void flickered, faded, and began to darken. Maelarkh Throon tried very hard not to sob in relief. The spell-chant seemed to be coming from that direction, and seemed also to be rising to a conclusion—a triumphant conclusion, blast it!
Even as some darkness returned to his vision, and glimpses

of his spellchamber with it, laced with drifting smoke, there was a fresh burst of brightness, laced with a shattering roar. A tremor shook the room, almost tossing the Master of Ironwind Tower off his feet.

Sparks were flooding forth from that conflagration and dying almost as soon as Throon saw them, only to be supplanted by more motes surging from behind. The motes surged from the widening, angrily glowing maw of what had been his least stable portal, the one he'd planned to gird with at least two more forcebrace spells before using again. Something, no, someowe, using magic as powerful as his own had seized control over that warp-way and was widening it, either to force something gigantic through it or to ensure that something unwilling could be thrust through it, struggling, and not be harmed in the passage.

Throon called on the Vaedren to drink the energies of his spellweb, collapsing it in dangerous haste, because just now, taking the slow, careful, usual way of dismantling the webwork of magics was undoubtedly far more dangerous. Something large and dark was already looming up in the widening maw of the portal, something bat-winged and shambling, as large and as gnarl-muscled as an ogre, its dark-rimmed eyes flashing with unfriendly menace, and a writhing forest of what looked like hungry red sucking worms where its belly should be.

Throon had seen such beasts before, both deep in the Underdark and in tomes where a long-ago sage's odd sense of humor had caused him to label such creatures "ineffable horrors."

Ineffable, indeed. Hungry and hostile, quite evidently. Already the thing was erupting out of the portal, trembling with the pain of brushing against surging energies in its haste to pounce on the lone Red Wizard standing before it and begin feeding.

The Master of Ironwind Tower calmly lashed it with the raw powers of the collapsing spellweb, searing the beast so that

it shuddered and trailed both stinking smoke and fluids leaking from bubbling skin. But it spread its great hands wide
to grapple and crush, and continued lumbering toward him.
Throon slashed at it again, unleashing all the spellweb energies in a great burst that momentarily blinded him and hurled his foe away.
Yet when the dazzle faded from his eyes and the last sparks winked out in the air around Throon, the horror still stood, its breast gaping open and most of its tentaclelike sucking intestines dangling in sizzling ruin.
It had been driven against the far wall of the room with some force... but now peeled itself away from those stones with an audible sucking sound, leaving patches of scorched hide behind, and came lumbering toward him again.
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"Not so swift, Throon," Rundarvas Thaael snarled into his scrying orb, baring his teeth in an unlovely smile. "You'll not escape that easily."
He turned to a third portal, now gaping open under the combined efforts of three sweating apprentices and carefully cast a spell through it that consumed two tiny vials of liquid. The first to wink out of existence contained some of the purple-green ichor of the ineffable horror, but the second was one he'd treasured for years, containing as it did four precious drops of blood spilled long ago by a certain young and ambitious Red Wizard by the name of Maelarkh Throon.
"Let what afflicts one afflict the other," he murmured, turning back to his orb to see if the bloodlink had worked. The next damage the Master of Ironwind Tower dealt to the Underdark monster should also be suffered by Throon himself. Or to put it another way, this should be good...
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Dust both rained and reigned in the halls and tharms of Ironwind Tower. The screams had ended, but curses could still be heard amid the rebounding echoes of the turret-

shaking blasts that had raised the blinding cloak of dust through whose gloom many folk were scurrying.
Most of them were servants busily fleeing out and down, seeking the lower shauls, but a handful were Throon's apprentices.
They came rushing the other way, hurrying to the Master's spellchamber.
Not one of them really expected to reach it in time.
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Maelarkh Throon cursed as he felt his hands begin to boil. The hulking horror was lurching forward at him despite its obvious pain and this new pain of his own could mean only one thing. Some of the Art lashing and surging around the riven chamber must be a bloodlink spell, cast from afar on him.
To bind him to the monster now shambling forward to slay him, no doubt, so that any harm he dealt it would also be visited on him.
That left him with only his hands, and any knife he could snatch, against its great reach and corded muscles. Which meant that the Master of Ironwind Tower would die in agony, sucked bloodless, long before the larger, stronger ineffable horror perished.
Already his arms were growing heavy, and his tongue thickening. The Vaedren burned on Maelarkh's wrist, and with a hiss of satisfaction he sank into that pain, seized on it, and rode it down into the tireless blood-red throb of linked enchantments...
If Thaael had cast the bloodlink using old Omslauvur's incantation, it could be shattered thus...
The Vaedren's surge was as fierce as he could make it; the bloodlink was already heavy upon him. For more than a moment Maelarkh Throon staggered blindly through a wild chaos of bursting radiances, sickening surges, and ear-clawing shrieks as enchantments sliced at each other, crashed into entanglements, bit, melted, sheared, and

spilled Art wildly in all directions.
His limbs were heavier, his shoulders broader, and his balance different. Maelarkh Throon tried to curse, but found that his voice had become deep and somehow liquid.
He'd twisted the forming bloodlink, not smashed the spell—so while there was no link between the ineffable horror and himself, there was also no longer any difference in their shapes.
The Vaedren on his wrist was the only way any of his apprentices could recognize the Master of Ironwind Tower now. From batwings to writhing intestines, Maelarkh Throon was every lumbering inch an ineffable horror.
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"Hrast!" Rundarvas Thaael slammed his fist down on the spellbook floating before him, sending it swooping away in a tinkling of clashing metal pages to crash into the bookshelf it had come from. "How did he do that? Surely that silly bracelet can't—"
He threw up his hands to wave away the rest of his useless question, whirled around in a vicious whirring of robes, and snapped to his apprentices, "You and you—through the portals! Get into Throon's spellchamber and slaughter both beasts. It matters nothing to me if you can see that wristlet clearly on one of them and not the other. He may be able to trade places with the Underdark creature! Go!"
Though Ahraul was one of the most able apprentices of Thaaeltor, his master hadn't ordered him to plunge through a warp-way into Ironwind. He itched to do so, to slay then plunder. Yet he knew better than to utter a sound just now—as Rundarvas Thaael whirled around, paunch wobbling, and said gleefully, "Be ready. I shall watch what befalls in Ironwind—and you shall be my lightning, striking in a trice at my command!"
Ahraul inclined his head in a solemn nod, but Thaael had already spun back to stare into his scrying orb, so as not to miss an instant more. He was leaning forward like a hunting

beast straining at the leash, hungry to pounce and plunder Ironwind of spellbooks and the like, the moment battle was done. A moment later, a sound arose from deep in his throat. The Master of Thaaeltor had started to growl.

The horror was coming for him, seared chest and all.

Maelarkh Throon did not stay to greet it. Hastening across the room as swiftly as his unfamiliar body allowed him, the Red Wizard touched a certain sequence of widely separated tomes, ignoring the flaring radiances of magic that arose angrily from them, and stepped back as a section of shelving flung itself open, swinging wide like a door.

Wood groaned and splintered as broad shoulders struck them. Throon hissed in pain, wrenched himself around sideways, and kept going into the secret passage beyond, a scant breath before the air in front of the shelves grew a sudden forest of stabbing blades.

Robed men were racing out of the glowing maws of his ruined portals now, and hurling far more fearsome spells. Lightnings clawed and crackled along the shelves, causing wardings on many books to flare up into angry little whirlwinds. The air acquired many tiny black stars that blossomed into blind teardrops with energetically snapping jaws. More than a few of these vanished in puffs of smoke at the touch of ruby lances of deadly force, rays that found no Maelarkh Throon to rend.

One book burst into flames and another flashed as its shield spells sent the ray that had touched it racing back at the apprentice of Thaaeltor who'd cast it.

And somewhere beyond a door close by, Rauksoun was standing in an alcove murmuring words he'd never have dared use if all was well in Ironwind Tower, incantations that used the secret names of lesser apprentices that only they and the Master were supposed to know.

Words that sent orders crashing iron-strong into their minds as they came racing, commands that sent them fearlessly into the spellchamber to hurl spells of their own heedless of

the danger.
That very bold fearlessness sent the 'prentice called Yaus down to death before he'd taken more than three steps and forced Belarl to expose himself to the spell that tore the flesh from his face and throat and left him
gurgling and dying, starved of air.
Yet that same boldness forced the spellblast that slew Kelsyn of Thaaeltor, and a breath later Urlaunt and Larass Haun, too, ere sending Elskryn Marthel, Thaael's newest and now-favorite apprentice, reeling into the jaws of a tome-spell that rendered him boneless.
Helplessly he slumped to the floor, a shapeless mass of flesh that roiled vainly in an endless attempt to breathe, let alone move . . . thrashings that soon weakened into feebleness.
By then Rauksoun had run out of apprentices to send to their dooms, and the spellchamber glowed with awakened spells that made it a deadly place indeed—but two hand-counts of apprentices that the distant Rundarvas Thaael had angrily ordered through the portals into Ironwind were dead or worse and a mere handful had managed to reach the passage Thaael had seen his transformed foe plunge through.
Throon's waiting traps made their numbers shrink fast, and some of the survivors abandoned pursuit of the monster wearing the enchanted bracelet and made their own ways across Ironwind Tower, slaughtering every living thing they found.
Gutless fools! No more discipline in them than the pleasure-wenches he'd taught to conjure handfire! Who, come to think of it, were about all the apprentices he had left, except...
With a snarl of exasperation, Rundarvas Thaael ordered Ahraul into the fray.
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Tace knew not what the little room had been intended for, but she was almost certain its existence—not just its

purpose—had been forgotten long ago.
It was deep in the storage chambers at one end of Iron-wind: a long stone room bare but for empty, sagging storage cupboards, a thick carpet of dust, and a decaying couch. Tace had found it because some fading spell caused this particular tharm to kindle its own faint glow of light whenever she entered it. Its lone door had a bar so stout she could
barely lift it, to keep the world out until she wanted to step into it again.
She didn't know if she ever wanted to do that.
When she flung herself down on the couch to whimper and wonder what to do, the ancient thing promptly collapsed with a dry little groan, pitching her onto the floor.
Where Little Trapped Tantaraze sat and sobbed quietly, mind whirling but empty of answers.
Where could she go? Where?
The magic of Red Wizards could reach everywhere, and—
There was a flash and a bang from high on the wall above her, and Tace screamed, just for a moment, as she flung herself away from... one of the storage cupboards.
She knew it was empty. She'd checked all of them, scores of times, but one of its doors was now gaping open crazily, a few tiny motes of restless light winking and dying along its edges.
She'd felt Ironwind shudder earlier, and heard many later, fainter spellbursts, one of them only a few breaths ago. Someone was making war with spells, war that the Master couldn't quell. If the gods truly smiled on Tantaraze, he just migh—
The cupboard fell off the wall with a long groan, then came a crash that sent Tace right across the room and halfway up the far wall. It split apart in a confusion of crumbling boards as she watched, and something gleaming came rolling out of it.
The Vaedren.

Shining as it came toward her...
She stared at it, mouth going dry. Had the Master somehow traced her here? Was it going to keep rolling, right up to touch her and visit some horrible magic on her? Was—
The air suddenly pulsed and pounded, making Tace wince.
Not from the wristlet, which was settling into a circling stop on the floor, not far from her, but from the door. The only door. Swiftfalcon, earn your name! Tace flung herself forward —too late.
By the time she skidded to a halt, she was almost embracing the sudden, swiftly-widening whorl of racing sparks.
Out of nowhere it had grown to fill that end of the room, barring her way out. She'd seen the Master create such a thing before, and knew all too well what it was: a portal was forming in her not-forgotten-enough room, right between her and the door.
As she stared, it flared to the height of the largest ornate arches in Ironwind's grandtharms, crackling along the ceiling, and vomited forth something out of nightmare.
A great, hulking monster strode unsteadily into the room. The ragged, scorched remnants of batwings protruded from slashed and burned shoulders wider than the couch had been. Two eyes blazed at her out of a face that was little more than a hood of flesh, above a forest of snakelike, reaching tentacles—glistening, hungry things that protruded from its belly. Huge, gnarled hands and forearms reached for her—
Tace screamed again, trying to climb the wall without turning her back on the thing.
It was coming for her, dragging itself across the room on its knuckles, limping and lurching with the pain-wracked, uneven gait of the clearly wounded. Tiny lightnings leaped and crackled across its brown-green hide as it came, and Tace saw that they were playing about the hilts of daggers that had been thrust deep into it, very recently.
One great, long-nailed hand reached out...

Not for her, but for the Vaedren. Clawing it up awkwardly, the monster flung it at Tace.
Trembling, mutely terrified, she caught it purely out of habit.
The creature waved a finger at her menacingly.
Tace clung to the Vaedren and mewed in fear. It was smooth and heavy and warm, and she found herself sobbing.
The great misshapen beast plunged that finger down to its wounds, then to the flagstones, to scratch aside the dust in a bloody trail that formed—letters!
The thing was writing a word on the flagstones in front of her, and that word was... Avenge!
Tace stared down at it, then up at that fearsome face.
That fierce stare burned into hers and those huge hands moved with careful, reassuring slowness, pointing at the Vaedren then at her wrist.
"Ace," it rumbled, in a bubbling ruin of a voice. "Swiii-L4Lkaun...ittullml>."
Tace took a step back, lips trembling. "M-master?"
The great ugly head nodded.
"Master Throon?"
The monster before her shuddered all over, as if struggling to—to—just for a moment, Tantaraze saw its flesh flow and change, collapsing into something much more slender. Then the great shoulders shrugged and the beast gestured again for her to take up the Vaedren and put it on her wrist.
The great bulk sat down, pressed both hands to its face, and drew them away slowly, arms trembling as if with great effort.
And the lower half of that face twisted, dwindled, and became a human mouth and jaw... a mouth that Tace found horribly familiar.
"Saraebo," that mouth said softly as one long arm reached out to touch the wall beside Tace.
And she was sure.
She'd heard Master Throon murmur that word betimes, when locking or unlocking doors in Ironwind. It was the word that

commanded all—when he used it, at least. He took care his apprentices never heard it unadorned with a lot of gibberish and fancy gestures.

The solid stone wall opened like a curtain drawn back, and her transformed Master waved at her to enter the dark passage waiting behind it.

Tace hesitated. This could be a prison, a place to wall her away until whatever troubles were raging were done, and he could—

"Quickly!" Throon hissed, as there was a sudden stirring in the air and the closed and barred stone door she'd come in by started to glow and bulge. "Those who hunt me are here! Go, Little One—and in years to come, when you stand tall and proud in the Red Brethren, remember this day and the 'prentices of Rundarvas Thaael—and think of some way to avenge me!"

A great force struck the stone door with strength enough to make the very floor buck and heave under them, the stones all around ring and rumble, and dusty rubble cascade down in torrents.

"Haste!" Throon snapped at her, fingers dwindling into something closer to his own, and shaping the air in the intricate gestures and poses of spellcasting. He started to chant the phrases of a magic Tace had never heard before, one that turned some of the dust around him crimson and brought it streaming toward him in smokelike, racing fingers.

Another spell-blow smote the door, branding momentary cracks of blinding glow across her gaze and sending tiny bolts of lightning aimlessly through the air to fade away before they struck anything.

Maelarkh Throon finished his incantation with a last triumphant word and spread his hands. From them a white radiance raced outward, forming a milky wall across the tharm from wall to wall, with Tace and the passage on one side of it, and Throon and the cracked, bulging door on the

other.
"Go, Little One," he cried, "and be safe this day, when—"
Then the world lashed out, deafening and blindingly bright, and that milky wall went hard and black.
Black oblivion, utter silence, gentle sensation of falling...
Her very ears seemed to be screaming, Tace thought dully. She realized she'd been flung shoulders-first into the wall behind her then along it to crash into the corner, which she was now sliding down.
And the ceiling, she saw in utter terror after movement overhead made her look up, was falling after her...
Terrified, Tace leaped for the passage, scarcely realizing the Vaedren had somehow found its way onto her wrist and tightened there as if it had been made for her.
The great crash at her heels snatched her up and flung her down the dark way gaping before her like a boneless ball, and she never knew that the flaring glow from her wristlet was the Vaedren reassembling her shattered skull and lesser bones,
again and again, as she crashed into stone walls and around corners and down unseen stairs, glancing off pillars and carvings and the bloody, bone-studded remains of beings not fortunate enough to be wearing a Vaedren, until...
All Ironwind, Delhumide, great Thay itself, and the overarching sky of Faerun obligingly went away...
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She was lying in darkness, surrounded by the faint glow of the Vaedren on her wrist. All around her doors were sliding open and hidden ways revealing themselves and the glows behind them going out. Which meant one thing: the Master of Ironwind Tower was dead.
And even if Rauksoun and the others had been slain too, their slayers were stalking these halls now. Or if they'd all perished fighting Maelarkh Throon and his traps and 'prentices, someone would come to plunder and slay. And that someone would be a Red Wizard, or several of them,

who would slaughter a lone slave lass without a moment's thought, if she were lucky.
She had to get out;
She had to get far from Thay, had to—the spellchamber, where the portals were! Yes! Even if they went straight to another wizard's tower, they were her only way out of this one, and all the vultures and worse whose eyes must be turning to it already. She had to get to the Master's spelltharm.
Before someone—or something—got to her.
¦©¦ ¦©•
"Well?" Rauksoun's voice was as cold and sneeringly confident as ever.
"I know we've shattered all of Thaael's spying spells and spun a ward that'll hold against his scrying for a day at least. I think we've found and slain all those he sent." That voice belonged to Varlbit, and he sounded more exhausted than exultant.
"Well done. Thank you, faithful Varl," Rauksoun said,
softly and sardonically. There was a wash of light that made the Vaedren flare on Tace's wrist, followed by a sob that might have been her own, and she knew Varlbit Dauroethan was no more.
That "we've" meant he'd probably been leading the Master's novices againstThaael's apprentices, and they were dead now, too.
She'd be next, if she didn't move just as quietly as she knew how. With infinite care Tace rose, turned, and stepped back from the archway she'd been creeping toward.
"Halt, whoever you are!" Rauksoun's voice was sharp. "The magic you carry will begin to consume you, very soon now, unless I cast the right spell on it, to render it safe! Stop where you stand, and wait for me."
Tace ducked along the next passage. It ran along the back of the spellchamber and was now littered with rubble, waist-deep in several places where the spellchamber wall had

been blasted out into it.
Rauksoun must have some way of detecting the Vaedren without knowing what it was or who bore it. Which meant she could only hide from him by abandoning it or getting onto the far side or into the heart of a powerful, active spell.
And with the Master dead, the only such magics nearby would be the portals in the spellchamber, her destination anyway. If they were gone, she was... doomed.
Something large and loud slithered and roared triumphantly in the spellchamber and she heard Rauksoun's startled curse.
Then he snapped out a swift spell and lightnings were slashing everywhere. Tace flung herself down between two toppled stone blocks as bolts sizzled and arced wildly and whatever had roared in triumph bellowed in pain.
Tace risked a swift glance through the rent wall. j
Something lizardlike but as large as one of the flickering portal-mouths was dying messily on the floor in a tangle of 3 spasming scaly legs, lashing tale, and curled tatters that had ! probably been wings. It had obviously come out of one of the three portals still flickering and pulsing in the spellchamber, and Rauksoun stood warily in front of those portals with an
intricately-shaped metal rod in his hands, spell-glows playing gently about its many barbs, spires, and flanges.
She ducked down swiftly, but not before he saw her, and it was only because she kicked out against one block and flung herself up, out, and sideways that she didn't melt into nothingness along with the stones that had sheltered her, in the roaring magic that howled through the gap in the wall and gnawed deep into the far wall of the passage, obliterating everything in its path.
The bolt was fierce but short-lived, and in its wake Rauksoun chuckled coldly.
"You're swift, little witch, I'll give you that. What is it you're carrying? The Vaedren? Did Throon trust you once too often,

and end up murdered by you for his troubles? Hey? Or did —"

He broke off to curse again and cast another hasty spell. It seemed Varlbit's ward did nothing to stop Thaael from sending monsters through the portals.

This might be her only chance.

Tace risked another look through the larger, still-smoking gap in the wall, and saw something smaller than the last beast flying at Rauksoun, thrashing a long, whiplike tail and beating wings like those of a great bat. It was doomed the moment his blossoming spell washed over it, but that just might give her time to...

She sprang over stones, kicked herself to the wall, clawed her way along it like a desperate spider, and was landing in a hard, bruising roll behind a portal even before she heard Rauksoun's angry roar.

As the flying monster died in a burst of flames that rocked the room with angry echoes, Tace let her roll carry her back to her feet, and stumbled the few strides she needed to thrust one foot over the humming threshold of a portal. Its magic tugged at her, circling endlessly past and through her, setting her flesh to tingling and trembling, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

The portal clawed at her, seeking to pluck her away to wherever its other end was—but Tace had the Vaedren off her wrist and held back out of the portal.

"You little fool! Give me that!"

Rauksoun's voice was furious, but also high with fear.

"N-no," she managed to reply, almost retching in terror as he came striding, hands raised like claws.

She'd overheard a little about portals, down the seasons—mainly when the Master was giving Rauksoun warnings about them.

Wherefore she knew that if he kept his senses, he'd dare not hurl spells at her while she stood in the portal-mouth, or even try to slay her with hurled blades for fear of ruining the

portal, twisting it into a wild vortex of magic that would widen and roam Ironwind, devouring all—or having her spilled blood attract one of "the great cruising monsters of the Darkness Between."

She shuddered again, at the thought of a monster slithering up suddenly behind her, out of the portal...

Rauksoun made a swift circling gesture with his rod and the Vaedren's glow kindled. Desperately Tace took a step back into the humming maw around her, hoping that her arm was just long enough to keep the Vaedren out, and so prevent the warp-way from claiming her.

"You'll die, little fool!" Rauksoun shouted at her, waving the rod like a reproving finger. "You'll take yourself to midair, high above a mountain peak, to tumble to your doom, or into the fishtangle webs of a water-spider cave deep in the Sea of Fallen Stars! Stop! Stop! Such magic must not be trifled with! You but doom yourself!"

"You'll doom me if I stay here!" Tace shouted back.

Rauksoun leered. "Life as my slave would not be a bad thing," he said in a suddenly gentle purr, spreading his hands. "Or perhaps... life as my queen?"

Why, the worm! Did he truly believe she was so simple-witted?

"Hah!" Tace spat at him, more angry than afraid. "You'll kill me the moment you get this—" she waved the Vaedren "—out of my hand!"

She whirled around with fresh resolve, and the portal brightened around her as she forced herself to stride forward into its gathering roar.

"No!" Rauksoun shouted from very close behind her. "You goto your death!"

Windstorms above! He must be running like a gale to try to snatch her!

"I go to a better place than this!" Tace cried back as the way took her. It seemed that a hundred lightnings were snarling out of the air around her to race through her, and she knew

her hair was standing straight out from her head like the spines of a wind-weed.
Wide-eyed, almost choking on her fear, Tace rode that bright torrent into the unknown.
Something sliced sickeningly across her back, and she whirled with a shriek. One of Rauksoun's arms was clawing at her, his dark sleeve protruding from a whorl of surging magic. But his fingertips were growing shiny, sharp, and impossibly long.
As she watched, they lengthened into claws as long as her entire arm, reaching spiderlike for her face to rake and slash again. Tace backed away, moaning in fear, and brought up the Vaedren like a shield.
The whirling energies seemed to follow it, and she stared at them, then at the glowing metal and did what she'd heard the Master tell the 'prentices to do with the little glow-lanterns they'd fashioned under his direction: stare at the metal and will yourself down, down into the magic ...
It was like a warm, stirring golden sea shot through with racing white threads of force, threads that bent around the Vaedren and seemed to shy away when she did this.
Which meant that if she did that—
There was a moment filled with Rauksoun's shriek of agony and the rising roar of the whirling portal—then both were cut off, as if by a slamming door, and she was alone in darkness with only the Vaedren's glow to show her the severed claws falling past her.
They landed on nothing, but went on tumbling softly beneath her feet, away into unknown nothingness beneath her.
She had snuffed the portal like a candle, leaving herself feeling sick and empty inside... and very much alone.
Fear was the familiar taste flooding her mouth as Tace clutched the Vaedren and stared all around. The darkness was brighter, somehow, off in that direction, so she went that way.

Then the unseen floor beneath her feet was gone and she was falling endlessly through blue mists shot with wisps and bubbles of silver and dark shadows... falling...

Slowing . .. more and more slowly Tace fell, until there came a time when she stopped flailing and whimpering, and tried to walk.

She was still sinking through nothingness, but it seemed to be a nothingness she could walk on.

Tantaraze the Little Imp strode boldly on, treading on sinking nothing, and praying to all the gods that the last words she'd shouted at Rauksoun would turn out to be true.

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Abruptly there was soft, rustling unevenness beneath her and dappled light around her, and much more rustling, laced with music of idly-plucked strings. Sunlight was lancing through more leaves than Tace had ever seen in her life, in a place of many, many trees and green growing plants. Plants were everywhere except right in front of her, where there was a forest pool of clear water.

Reclining in it was a woman wearing only a magnificent mane of long, silver hair, with a harp floating in the air above her, its strings quivering. They were thrumming into silence now, but there'd been no hand to play them, with the woman only looking up at the instrument. It now floated smoothly out of sight behind some bushes, and the silver-haired woman was regarding Tace curiously.

"Well, now, who might you be? And what magic are you carrying?"

Tace stopped, clutching the Vaedren and not knowing what to say. The woman in the pool seemed to be alone, and there were no clothes in sight, though there was a narrow path winding off into the bushes on the far side of the pool. Herb bushes that looked to have been deliberately planted and tended.

The woman was waiting patiently, with a pleasant half-smile on her face.

"I'm Tace—Tantaraze," Tace blurted, "and this is the Vaedren. It was given to me by my Master, before he died."
The silver-haired woman lifted an eyebrow, and it seemed to Tace that slight sadness touched her eyes. "Well met, Tace. I am Storm Silverhand, and this around us is my farm. Would it trouble you overmuch to share your master's name with me and the manner of his passing?"
Tace sighed, looking behind her and seeing nothing but trees. She glanced swiftly around for places to run or other people, but saw only a rabbit loping past in distant trees, downslope. She drew in a deep breath, met those disconcertingly warm eyes, and said steadily, "My master was Maelarkh Throon of Ironwind Tower—and he ... he was hunted down in Ironwind this day by wizards from Thaaeltor and maybe by some of his own 'prentices, too. He—he died helping me escape from a store-tharm, and told me to avenge him."
Storm nodded. There was clear sadness in her eyes, now. "Do you know how to use it to do that?"
Tace stared at her. "Why do you want to know? " she asked softly, trying to judge which tree she could best leap behind, if it came to that.
Something that was not quite a smile touched Storm's lips.
"Easy, Tace, I'm not hungry to snatch your bauble from you. As to the why, I knew Maelarkh Throon rather well, once. He will be missed. Now stop looking for escape-runs and tell me which you'd rather have first. Warm soup? Cool wine? A soak here in the pool with me? Or somewhere soft to sleep on, and a door you can close against the world until you've rested?"
Tace knew her mouth had fallen open, but... but...
She sat down in a sudden heap on the moss at the edge of the pool and peered into the water. "Is it—deep?"
Storm looked her up and down. "About up to your chin, I'd say, unless you go in yonder, where it'll come to about the bridge of your nose."

Tace looked longingly at the pool, and in a sudden whirlwind dipped fingertips into it then snatched them right back.
"No, 'tis not full of beasts waiting to drag you down, and I'm not one such either," Storm told her.
"You know magic," Tace said, almost accusingly.
"Some," Storm replied, with what might have been the faintest of sighs. "You joining me?"
Tace hugged her knees and murmured, "No."
"Have you decided what you want to do?"
Tace looked away into the trees. "No."
Storm nodded. Her tresses curled briefly around her ears, as if with a life of their own, and without reaching a hand to anything she rose straight up out of the water, dripping.
Tace stared at her as Storm turned slowly. Not a gesture nor so much as a whisper of an incant... and now the water on that sleek and shapely skin was simply—gone. The dripping had stopped. Unconcernedly bare, Storm trod air over to the path, looked back, and asked, "Coming? Soup's ready, and fairly decent tea, too."
Tace swallowed, met those strange eyes—at times they seemed very blue and at other moments blue-white, or even as silver as a sword blade—then nodded and hastened around the pool to follow.
She hadn't gone more than six strides along the path when the air around her suddenly sang with half-seen silver and sizzling white threads. The Vaedren tugged violently at her arm then shot away from her, shrieking sparks. Storm whirled around, hands on hips, to stare narrowly at her.
Tace froze as the threads faded away, heart pounding.
Storm glanced at the Vaedren, spinning in midair, and as if obeying her, it floated back to Tace's wrist.
"I'm sorry," the silver-haired woman said softly, "but I had to be sure no tracing magics had been cast on you."
Trembling, Tace managed to make her voice calm. "And?"
"None any longer."
Drawing in a deep, shuddering breath and reminding herself

that speaking in anger would probably get her swiftly killed, she asked, "What spell did you just use on me?"
"None. I called up a tangle of the Weave. Interesting wristlet you have there."
Tace clapped her hand to it, mouth going dry. "So what are you going to do to me now?"
Storm's smile was sad. "You're not in Thay now, lass, and here you're no one's slave. I'm going to feed you and get a bed ready for you then ask you foolish questions until you fall asleep from boredom. On the morrow you can do pretty much whatever you want to do, and the day after that, too, and so on, until you're ready to choose a new life. I believe I can keep coming up with impertinent questions that long. Will that be all right?"
Tace looked at the bare, silver haired woman, bit her lip—then, helplessly, started to laugh.
Storm smiled, glided forward to slip an arm around the Little Imp of Ironwind, and asked, "Are you very attached to this Vaedren?"
Tace stopped laughing. "Oh. You want it, then, in payment for—"
"No, nothing of the kind. I want it out of here. Your M—Maelarkh left it unfinished, and it's been twisted into something quite dangerous since. If I promise to help you avenge him—and I can be very dangerous, I promise you—will you let me examine it thoroughly then get rid of it?"
Tace blinked and clapped her hand over it again. "I—I—"
"Is it really that reassuring? Or just the only thing of his you have to cling to, and something of power that has served you in getting here?"
Tace nodded slowly, not knowing what to think of this warm, quick-witted, powerful woman. "I don't want to let it go," she admitted, "but I... yes, I'm scared of it."
Storm swung an idle hand and the air was suddenly full of Weave-threads again, bright and racing. "Just toss the Vaedren gently up into the air," she murmured, and without

really knowing why, Tace found herself doing so.
White threads lanced in at it from all sides, in a whirlwind that flashed silver and blue and silver again, then—froze.
Black lines like glistening leeches appeared in the air around the wristlet, lines that flowed into intricate shapes,
like characters in some unknown but flamboyant language, then froze, too, to hang all around the Vaedren.
Storm stepped slowly around the floating wristlet, peering at one dark squiggle after another. Then her eyes narrowed and she asked the air above them, "High One, is this sigil yours?"
IT IS.
Tace had barely heard of the god Azuth, but every whispering echo of that calm but great mind-voice chanted his name, over and over.
Without thinking she sank to her knees, quivering in awe and wonder.
Storm, amazingly, seemed as calm as ever. "Have I your permission to twist this and change this, so as to...?"
MAKE THIS BRACELET A WINDOW INTO THE MIND OF THE ONE WEARING IT?
"Yes," Storm replied, sounding as impish as a certain Tace knew how to be.
Not that Tace realized that until much later. Azuth's mind-chuckle had thrust her to the brink of gasping ecstasy, in which she was only dimly aware that she was lying on her face on the path, drooling on some very soft moss.
She never saw that Azuth's divine mirth left even Storm Silverhand shuddering, with mouth open and eyes half-closed.
WHY NOT?
Collecting her wits with an effort, Storm caught a handful of silver threads and did some weaving all around the Vaedren that never quite touched the wristlet but made it flicker, flow, and change just the same.
WELL DONE. WHERE SHALL I SEND IT?

Tace had recovered enough by then to see Storm's impish smile as the silver-haired lady tossed her head and shared a mind-image of an intended recipient Tace did not recognize with the thrilling Presence Tace didn't quite dare to look toward.

And the Weave flashed, spun, and whirled the Vaedren away. <5>

It was the habit of Fzoul Chembryl, on pleasant summer evenings when the distasteful work of the day had been wearying but was done, to stroll for a few stolen moments of solitude in his private garden.

It was more a time to collect his wits than to take pleasure in the deserted loveliness around him. The servants had carefully gone hours before, and several spells were hard at work keeping all lesser life at bay until the master of the Zhentarim took his leave.

He unstoppered the tiny vial of rubythroat he intended to drain as he stood on the little bridge over the lilypond, in his usual toast to himself, then stopped, peered, and frowned.

There was a metal ring lying in the shallow water beside the bridge—a very large ring, made for a wrist rather than a finger, that definitely hadn't been there a few breaths back, when he'd first crossed the bridge.

And more than that, although Fzoul was quite sure that he'd never seen this particular adornment before—had in fact never seen anything unexpected in his lilypond before— it seemed so familiar, somehow.

Fzoul knew quite well how deadly a failing curiosity was, and yet...

His hand went out, drew back for a moment, then stretched forth again. And yet...

Introduction

HOW WISDOM CAME TO THE MAIMED WIZARD

This tale is something of a coda to Shandril's Saga, giving us a glimpse of "what befell one wizard next" by looking in on one of the villains introduced in the novel Hand of Fire.

Specifically, what happened to Eirhaun the Maimed, mage of the Zhentarim, beginning on the twenty-eighth day ofFlamerule, in the Year of the Prince (1357DR).
For students of Realmslore, "the spellfire trilogy" can be precisely dated as follows: although its first scene takes place on 16 Flamerule in 1356 (the Year of the Worm), the main action in Spellfire begins on Mirtul 6 of1357 (the Year of the Prince), and ends on 10 Flamerule of that year.
Crown of Fire picks up right where Spellfire leaves off, and in turn ends in the wee early hours of 22Flamerule, 1357.
Hand of Fire begins on the night of 21 Flamerule, and its main action continues through the night of 27 Flamerule, though the Epilogue runs up to the night ofl Eleint, 1357.
Having settled matters chronological, this story
raises but doesn't clarify a little mystery that students of Realms-lore can ponder, and gives us another glimpse of the internal politics of the Zhentarim. About the latter, Volo has a pertinent comment: "That's the trouble with wizards. Their disagreements over policy always result in battles, and in battles many innocents always get killed. You'd think they'd have run out of innocents long ago..."
HOW WISDOM CAME TO THE MAIMED WIZARD
mow, 0 mages, that there is learning and there is wisdom—and they are very far from being the same thing.
Azuth the High One Utterances from the Altar: Collected Verbal Manifestations of the Divine and Most Holy Lord of Spells (holy chapbook, assembled by anonymous priests of Azuth circa 1358 DR)
Eirhaun the Maimed sat alone in a dark, ruined tower and thought dark thoughts.
Thinking dark thoughts was, after all, his job.
Detecting traitors among the ranks of the Brotherhood would turn a mind to vile darkness if it were
not that sort of mind to start with. Eirhaun's was.
Cold winds whistled through the empty windows, stirring the dead, dry branches of a long-abandoned gorcraw nest. No

birds were bold enough to visit the tower now, through the dark singing of his wards. Nothing living was.
Wherefore the feared Maimed Wizard of the Zhentarim came to this forgotten shell of a keep high in the Storm Horns when he wanted to be alone. To craft magic, or to hide, or to find utter solitude in which to think.
Or all of those things, as he was doing now, his four eyes floating like glistening, pale grapes around his eyeless head. His empty eyesockets stared at nothing at all, but his just-healed hand itched abominably—and worse luck, Alustriel's curse held. Despite all the spellweavings he could think of, his regrown fingers were tiny coiling serpents, as before. They bit at each other idly and restlessly now, reflecting their owner's mood and stealing from him even his old habit of drumming his fingertips on the arm of his chair.
Yet he supposed he must count himself lucky to be able to sit anywhere and be restless about anything. Spellfire had come reaching across a good slice of Faerun at him, despite being deflected by its real target—Hesperdan—with force enough to shatter Eirhaun's stronghold.
A dozen great caverns, the heart of a mountaintop, with all of their hundreds of interwoven enchantments, guardians, wards, and shieldings. Brought down by a thrust of magic stronger than anything he'd ever felt before, even when Dread Bane himself had walked Faerun ... stronger magic than should have been possible.
A dying thrust? Perhaps. Some folk were saying the lass was dead now. But everyone who'd been snapping hungrily at her heels a-seeking spellfire was dead, and a long-established caravan encampment transformed into a smoking crater. The "they" who were saying Shandril Shessair was gone were the survivors who'd been safely far away, sending others in to snatch spellfire... and to get slain. Survivors who now had a very good reason for claiming her dead: the saving of their own skins. They had their own superiors who could order them to try to snatch spellfire

instead, and so swiftly find their own waiting graves.
Even he, the most feared Zhentarim, had his superiors. Yet thus far he'd had no sending from Manshoon, nothing to urge old Eirhaun to go seeking spellfire. Yet knowing the truth was part of his job. How else could one pounce on treachery?
'Twould be good to know just what had happened to Shandril of Highmoon. That meant looking, just looking. 'Twasn't as if he had to reach out his hand—serpents and all—into the light to foolishly make a grab for the fire that ate magic.
Yet if he never peered and learned, he might be letting a chance at spellfire slip away. Spellfire that could sweep away all the Manshoons, Hesperdans, Elminsters, and Larlochs Faeriin could furnish and make the lonely man "they" called the Maimed Wizard as powerful as he deserved to be.
Powerful enough to sweep away his disfigurements and bind all women he fancied to him, to banish all loneliness forever.
Ahem.
Nay, these were the sort of dreams of mighty power novice mages indulged in, ere their most foolish—often fatal—pratfalls.
Yet merely looking and learning would be no more than prudent...
... and fulfilling his duties...
... and was, after all, something that could do no harm at all.
And therefore... Yes.
¦©¦ ¦©¦ <§>¦ ¦©¦
Narm stiffened as something brushed his mind like a soft and questing worm. "What—?" he gasped aloud, lifting a hand as if he could reach inside his head and wipe away... something...
Alustriel of Silverymoon reached out a long arm with the speed of a striking serpent to lay the tips of her long fingers on Narm's shoulder. She frowned at what she sensed. Digging in her nails, she drew the young mage back against herself. He sagged into slumber there without ever knowing

it, and Alustriel turned and smiled at her sister Laeral. It was not a nice smile.
Thoughts flashed between them, eye to eye.
Silent agreement was reached, and their minds reached out together...
¦©¦¦©¦ ¦©¦ ¦©¦
So this bumbling lad was really the lass Shandril, her mind kept asleep by the Chosen of Mystra—of course!
Why, the cunning witches! Silver fire not enough for them, eh? They just had to have spellfire, too!
Well, now, perhaps a little surprise lay fittingly in their immediate future. These strutting Sisters had gone their way in serene, victorious arrogance for far too long behind Mystra their shield. Yet surely sleep-quelling the mind of a young novice she-mage was against the teachings of the Lady of Mysteries? How can a captive wizard, forcefully kept in slumber and her body reshaped into the guise of another, spread the use and influence of magic?
Yes!
Let the maid of Highmoon be snatched thither—now! [spellweaving flourish, satisfaction unleashing] [bright moment, victory, success!] [smile]
Now find me, you silver-haired freaks! Your treasure snatched ha ha! Let you look for the mighty hand that took her, and find—
Nothing.
<Sr
The hall was vast, dark, and dusty. Impossibly tall and thin feminine-shaped statues flowed up smoothly from pedestals, or lay in rubble here and there among the cracked and tilted flagstones ... stones of erreat size and formerlv creat smoothness. Truly a Hall of Dead Queens.
Elves, or humans akin to elves in taste, limbs, and hauteur, had made this place in softly swirling shadows beyond a hidden portal long before Eirhaun Soundaeril's great-great-grandsire had first drawn breath. It seemed to the Maimed

Wizard, when by chance he found it, that it had lain abandoned, its wards faded to mere whispers, for longer than his lifetime.

No water nor sunlight touched this place, wherefore it was unsuitable as a refuge. Yet men less coldly suspicious and unloved than Eirhaun looked for hiding places and caches in which to keep their magic, and this one seemed perfect for both. Into it the Maimed Wizard built spell after spell, linking the failing magics of yesteryear with strong new enchantments of his own devising. The silent, half-seen web he built obeyed only him, and lay upon the darkness as a listening heaviness, a cold awareness that matched its maker.

Stronger he built it, and stronger still, until its vaulting shadows filled the chamber, fanning out from broken pedestals like thick trees of darkly humming magic. Items he seized or found in tombs he built into its web, to lurk until he needed them—and he'd long since pronounced it, with some satisfaction, a cage strong enough to hold any archmage. The bones of some Zhentarim who'd thought themselves clever and mighty in Art floated among its whispering wards, proof of its power.

Surely it could hold one lass who hurled spellfire, if her mind was bound slumbrous by no less than the Chosen...

Shadows shifted and Eirhaun stood among them, wrapping himself in their tendrils like a great cloak, assuming command of the great cold web of enchantments.

Another shimmering was already there, a whirling in the darkest corner. Right where he'd put it. He reached out cautiously, probing...

Its mind was still bound shut—shut against him, yes, but not for much longer. All he need do now is slide strands of his web into the maid's body and bind it to his will. Then call up his strongest shielding against any flare of spellfire, and stab at that sleeping mind!

"And so," he breathed aloud, his voice one whisper lost

among many, "my snatching of spellfire shall be accomplished. Such a small and easy thing..."
Eirhaun let his awareness sweep throughout his spellweb, seeking intruders, making sure the wards that should hide his captive were doing so.
All was quiet. Of course.
With a smile like smoothed-out velvet, Eirhaun Sooundaeril extended his spell-strands, dark Art coiling like a huge but unseen serpent to his bidding.
Ah, such power! The strands touched his prisoner, and clung.
Confusion roiling beneath his probings. He bore in and down, sinking deeper.
There was a sudden flash of cold, blue light, a—
Spellfire!
The Maimed Wizard bore down with his strands and his shield together, thrusting—
Silver flame blossomed in the darkness, searing through both!
Silver?
In the wake of that flash, darkness was thrust back from its source in the corner where two crumbling statues soared like needles thrust up close together. The gently-smiling lady who stood between them was much taller than Shandril of Highmoon.
Silver hair tumbled and stirred around her as if in a prank-some breeze, and her eyes were two stars of blue-white fire. She wore a dark sash over light-hued leather, high boots, breeches, and a tunic that clung smooth and tight to her own hide. She also wore a smile.
"Well met, Eirhaun Sooundaeril," she said with icy impish-ness. "I am Laeral of Waterdeep, and this—" she held out one of her hands, light dancing over its raised palm, "—is the spellfire you seek!"
"I—" Startlement smote the Maimed Wizard, and rage flared with it, but he had time for no more than that one baffled

word ere the radiance around Laeral flared and another light sprang up in his many-shadowed darkness, down the far
He whirled to stare at it and found himself meeting the cold eyes of another silver-haired woman, this one tall and mighty-thewed in her worn and much-used armor. "Dove am I, wizard," she told him in coldly smiling challenge, "and this, too, is spellfire!" Light was curling above the hand she held out to him.
Eirhaun took a step back, his eyes flitting to gaze at both women at once, his hissing serpent-fingers curling and coiling involuntarily. He was less than surprised when the radiance in Dove's hand flared, and a third light sprang into being behind him.
Within its flickering caress stood another silver-haired woman, one whom he'd spied upon with spells many a time, a woman whose black leathers bore the fragrance of green growing things in Shadowdale. Her smile told him she'd been quite aware of his farscrying scrutiny.
"Your unsleeping eyes know me well already, Eirhaun," she said with a lilt of mirth, "but you may as well have my name, too: Storm Silverhand, Bard of Shadowdale. With a handful of spellfire, of course."
The cupped flame she held flared at those words and a fourth light was born elsewhere in the shadowed hall. The Maimed Wizard turned with a snarl, drawing his shieldings in close around himself, and beheld—
Another silver-haired Sister he knew. "Alustriel of Silvery-moon," he spat, fear now wrestling with his rage. What trap were they spinning here? What had they planned?
"Fitting justice for what you have become," Alustriel told him, as if she could hear his thoughts. "With the aid of—" she held up her cupped hand in turn, "—a little spellfire, of course." The dancing flames in her palm flared on cue.
With trembling hands Eirhaun wove a second shielding around himself, even as he turned and saw a tall and scornful she-drow whose obsidian skin was barely covered

by the open gown she wore. Silver hair swirled around her as she fixed him with large, dark eyes whose contempt bit like dagger points, and purred, "Qilue am I, and I, too, bring you spellfire. The doom you were seeking?"

The flare of flame in those lone black fincers heralded yet another burst of radiance. Eirhaun turned reluctantly this time, to face a wild-eyed human woman who wore only the tangles of her restlessly swirling silver hair and the tatters of a once magnificent black gown that looked as if it had been burned, torn by nettles, and slashed by blades. Unlike her Sisters, she was barefoot, and her eyes were like two flames that almost outshone the flickering in her uplifted hand. Almost.

"Most men call me The Simbul," she said with a cold smile. "And I, too, Eirhaun, bring you spellfire."

The Maimed Wizard moaned as the flames held by the Witch-Queen of Aglarond flared up. He was doomed, he was going to die here, he—

"Men all too often forget me," came a cold whisper from just behind him. Eirhaun whirled wildly, letting out a little shriek despite himself.

"Yet I persist, and am called Sylune, the Witch of Shadow-dale." The ghostly, glowing outline of a barefoot, silver-haired woman in a gown stood on empty air close enough to reach out and touch Eirhaun. He could see the spellfire raging in her palm through her wraithlike fingers. She smiled at him and asked, "Do I have to tell you what I hold, or are your wits working for you now?"

She lunged forward as if his shieldings were not there, thrusting through the air at him with spellfire flaming in a hungry circle around her shoulders, her face falling away to an empty-socketed, grinning skull.

The Maimed Wizard smote at her with all the Art he could command, shrieking in terror, and in the flash and sizzle of deadly, slaying Art that followed, his floating eyes had time for but one brief glimpse ere plunging darkness swallowed

him. Seven outflung and empty hands were raised against him, with no trace of spellfire in them, and his own magics were rebounding from them back at him!

No!

Brightness, blindness, raw agony, bones torn forth from his flesh, no tongue left to shape his screams...

Out of red pain he squirmed, helpless, writhing, and weeping when he remembered how. Was this godly torment, or had his contingency magics dragged him back to... here?

Where was here? <

Cold hard stone beneath him and an excited exclamation. Voices ... blood roared like surf in his ears then, drowning out what they said, and he tumbled in fresh pain that made him whimper and shout then whimper again.

"We found him here," a frightened voice said, "and..."

"Were scared enough to overcome your fear of me," a coldly familiar voice purred. "Well, well. You've learned something this day, at least. All is not lost. I was beginning to wonder. You've earned the right to consume food here—and so live—a few days longer. Go and rejoin the rest of the novices."

A boot scraped the stone very close by, and that familiar voice said from just above him, "You are Eirhaun Sooundae-ril, and are now truly Maimed, indeed. Would you care to share with your fellow Zhentarim the reason for your present shame?"

A vial was unstoppered, and water that stung like winter ice rained down on the fires raging in Eirhaun. He smelled the tang of healing enchantments upon it.

Light glimmered in the heart of its spattering—one of his floating eyes had been restored—and his jaw worked, now, at his command. He moved it experimentally, discovering he had a tongue once more, and used it to ask, "Hesperdan?"

"Of course," the Old Man of the Zhentarim said sardonically. "I have been Hesperdan for some centuries now, and intend to go on being Hesperdan for some time to come. But you, Eirhaun: What has befallen you? Who or what laid you so

low?"
"Spellfire," the Maimed Wizard managed to gasp at the figure looming in his swimming sight. "Seek it not!"
Hesperdan smiled down at him and replied gently, "Of course not. I'm not the fool here." And he turned away.
The Old Man of the Zhentarim was strolling across the chamber as Eirhaun struggled to raise himself on one elbow —arms! He had arms again!—and focus properly.
Strolling, and—gone, in a single step, winking out as if he'd never been there. "Hesperdan?" Eirhaun asked the empty air. "Hesperdan?"
A faint reek clung to the air around him. His own scorched hair and—no. No, 'twas... pipesmoke.
Now just where, down all the years, had he smelled that pipesmoke before?
Introduction
THE EYE OF THE DRAGON
This story whisks us to Waterdeep and another young lass grappling with growing up and mastering magic. (Is there no end to them? Well, no, of course not. If every generation grappled not with such things, in a world of rampant magic, there'd soon be no more generations.)
It begins on the twenty-sixth day ofKythorn, in the Year of the Wave (1364 DR), and concerns a lass soon interested in having dealings with Khelben "Black-staff" Arunsun, the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, as well as a wizard and Chosen ofMystrafar more severe than his colleague, the infamous Elminster of Shadowdale.
The notorious Volo once read a warning uttered by the Blackstaffin which he advised would-be visitors to Waterdeep that if they misbehaved he was duty-bound to severely limit their actions, and commented thus: "A friendly note to visitors. When a wizards speaks of 'severely limiting your actions,' he means hell kill you. Personally, and in a very special way. Undead are under the control of the wizard —or priest—who created them, you see. So be good or you

may spend the
rest of eternity washing Khelben's socks and underthings... or t worse, all of his giggling apprentices' socks and underthings! \ Adventure is where you find it, sure, but I suspect you have other \ things in mind if you come to Waterdeep. So obey the 'Warning: I Khelben At Work' signs, and if you absolutely must burgle a home, don't make it Blackstaff Tower. Laeral lives there, and she makes Khelben look positively gentle and kind. I know—no, don't ask..."
And yes, Laeral is in this tale, and Blackstaff tower and \ Khelben, too. Best read on before someone else dangerous or notorious appears...
THE EYE OF THE DRAGON
jnbreene glanced irritably out the window as she hurried along the Hall of Clouds behind the politely insistent seneschal. Why did Grandmama Teshla want to see her just now?
The deliciously cooling breeze that had slid around Hawkwinter House was dying away. Water-deep would soon be cloaked in a damp, clinging haze that played Tymora's happy dance with lightning spells... even if all the household slept, she'd dare not conjure a single spark. Awkward, unpracticed casting was all she could manage.
And another tenday would pass in endless Palace promenades, dull tutoring sessions on the honorable and very long history of the Hawk-winters, and idle chatter with the emptyskulled high ladies who were her sisters' friends—if such a cold-hearted, scheming, petty lot of catsclaws
could truly be deemed the "friends" of anyone.
Another tenday in which Ambreene Hawkwinter, one more society beauty in a city that teemed with superior young she-nobles, would work no more magic of consequence. Ambreene scowled at herself in a mirror as she hurried past It would be so easy to just give in, banishing to memory her secret sessions of sweating concentration and fearfully hissed spells, and just idle her days away, drifting inevitably

into the boredom of marriage to the prized lout, dandy, or stonehead of some noble family favored by the Hawkwinters. So gods-be-damnably easy.

She tossed her head and glared at a startled servant as she turned at the end of the hall into Teshla's Tower and began to climb the spiral stairs to the rooms Grandmama Hawkwinter never left. That ease is why it must never happen, she vowed silently. I will not become another wisp-headed catsclaws—I'll see Hawkwinter House hurled down into its own cesspools first!

The seneschal came to the door at the end of the worn red shimmerweave carpet and rang the graceful spiral of brass chimes that hung beside it. Unlatching the heavy door, he pulled it wide, stepping smoothly back and bowing to usher Ambreene within.

The youngest daughter of the Hawkwinters strode past him with the absently confident air that made the servants call her the Little Lady Queen of All Waterdeep behind her back, into the dim, quiet apartments that were all the kingdom the once-mighty Dowager Lady Hawkwinter had left.

Priceless glowstone sculptures drifted in slow dances as she passed. Enchanted, glowing paintings of flying elven hunts and dancing lords and ladies displayed endless animations, and a fascinated Ambreene was a good twenty paces into the luxurious chamber when she realized she was alone. There was no trace of the three elderly chamberladies who sat in the lounges on either side of the central bedchamber stair, waiting to be summoned up it into Teshla's presence. Ambreene glided to a graceful halt amid those empty lounges, uncertain as to what to do next.

An eye winked open in the smooth ivory sphere adorning one bottom stairpost, and a mouth appeared in the other, saying in the familiar dry, waspish tones of Grandmama Teshla: "Come up, girl. I've not much time left."

A little chill arose inside Ambreene at that calm statement. Obediently she set foot on the curving stair. So it was the

summons she'd dreaded, come at last. She gathered her skirts and mounted the steps in haste.

She should have visited Grandmama more often and stayed longer, despite the watchful, over-scented old chamberladies with their vague, condescending comments and endless bright, cultured, empty phrases about the weather. She should have told Lady Teshla—who'd dabbled in dark and daring magic in her younger days, they said—about her own fumbling attempts to master magic. She should have...

Ambreene reached the head of the stairs and came to a shocked halt. Grandmama was quite alone, lying propped up on her pillows in bed. She must have sent the servants all away and unbound her hair herself.

A soft-hued driftglobe hovered above the bed and Ambreene could see that Lady Teshla was wearing a black robe whose arms were writhing, leaping flames of red silk—robes better suited to an evil seductress than the matron of one of the oldest, proudest houses in all Waterdeep. She looked dangerous, and the glint in her old, knowing eyes made that seeming even stronger.

Ambreene swallowed. "Grandmama, I came as qui—"

"Swift enough, it seems," the dry voice said, with just a hint of weariness. "I breathe yet. Stand not there quivering like an unschooled courtesan, girl, but come and give me a kiss—or you may yet be too late."

Numbly Ambreene did as she was bid. The old arms trembled as they went around her, but the lips were as firm and imperious as always. Ambreene looked into the black, bottomless pools of Grandmama's eyes—a falcon's eyes, her father had once called them—and said, "Grandmama, there's something I must tell you. I've been trying to—"

"Weave a few spells," Lady Teshla finished the sentence, almost impatiently. "Don't you think I know this, girl? What way does my favorite window face?"

Toward Ambreene's own bedchamber windows, of course, but...

"I'm glad you used the word 'trying.' A right mess you made of the darkshadow cloak," Teshla said dryly, "but you have all the grand gestures right, girl. Some young blade'U quake in his boots if he ever tries too much at a dance, and you hurl the pig-face curse his way!"

Ambreene flushed in embarrassment. How had Grand-mama, shut up in this dim towertop room, seen that ? She was sure she'd managed to restore the old warhound's rightful looks before his frightened yelps had...

The drif tglobe swirled and drew her eyes—and suddenly its heart flashed into a view of distant Castle Waterdeep, from above, as if she were standing atop Mount Waterdeep looking down on it!

"That's how I see all," Teshla told her as the scene faded. "Touch the sphere."

Wonderingly, Ambreene did so. A tingling went through her from her fingertips, and Teshla nodded approvingly.

"The globe will follow you, now. When you go, all the house can think I was just bestowing a little magic on my kin before I went to the arms of the gods. But this is why I summoned you."

A wrinkled hand moved with surprising speed, drawing up the fine chain that had gleamed down into Teshla's shrunken bodice for as long as Ambreene could remember, and bringing into view a delicately-worked silvery metal dragon's head, in profile. Its single eye was a huge, dark, glossy gem of a sort Ambreene had never seen before in a lifetime of watching wealth drift languidly by at feasts and revels. She stared at it... and it seemed to stare back at her.

"What is it?" she whispered as Teshla drew the chain off over her head with arms once more slow and weary, and held it out.

"The Eye of the Dragon, child," Teshla said softly. "May it serve you better than it did me—and may you use it far more wisely than I did. Take it."

The youngest daughter of House Hawkwinter swallowed,

then lifted her head and calmly reached out for the gem.
Teshla chuckled at the imperious manner, then tilted her head to watch her descendant closely, almost warily. , tj,,
In Ambreene's awed fingers, the gem seemed warm and alive—and weightless, as if it could float on its own. It held waiting, unsleeping power, strong magic that Ambreene could feel through her entire body. She stared at it in amazement, then looked up at her grandmother.
"I-I never dreamed that there was so precious a thing in this house," she said wonderingly. "And to be given it... thank you, Grandmama! All my thanks! I don't know how to say it well enough, but—"
"Know what it does before being so free and eager with your joy," Teshla told her dryly. "It is your true inheritance, for only a sorceress can use it. Keep it secret, for no one else within these walls knows of it, and it is a thing of great power."
Her dark eyes stared somberly into Ambreene's own. "Be warned, girl—learn its ways thoroughly, and use it only with great care, for it steals and stores memories, and can leave a man a hollow husk... as I learned, to my cost."
Ambreene stared at her grandmother with the beginnings of a frown playing about her brows. Grandmama turning a man into a—husk? What man could she have been so interested in, or who would even look at her? It must have been some reckless thief, come to the tallest tower of Hawkwinter House in hopes of stealing away with some baubles...
"Speculate all you want," Teshla told her, as if reading her thoughts, "but waste not the breaths left to me in foolish questions as to who and why. That is my own business, and you can learn the truth from the Eye after I am gone. But remember, and beware: it steals memory."
Ambreene had been about to put the chain over her own neck. She stopped abruptly, looked at the gem as if it might bite her, and hurriedly slid it into the outermost pocket of her robes.

"Wise," Teshla said, falling back into her pillows. "Now that is done, and..." Her eyes closed and her voice trailed away.
Ambreene stared at her in sudden alarm. "Grandmama?" she cried. "Gra—"
Then she heard the rattle of a drawn breath, and— slowly and unsteadily—another. Grandmama still lived. Yet Ambreene knew this would be her grandmother's deathbed. Soon.
Ambreene stood silently by Lady Teshla's bed for a long time, thinking furiously—then whirled and left the room, striding hard. The driftglobe sailed silently along in her wake.
She was almost running when she swept past the seneschal, ignoring his surprised look and murmured question. She traversed the Hall of Clouds faster than the old warrior had ever seen her move before, so that he had to trot to keep up —and instead of storming into her rooms or bursting into tears when her chambermaids rose to greet her, the young lass turned abruptly aside to descend the back stair that led to the stables and thence to the House gates.
The seneschal clattered after her, clutching his scabbard to keep it from tangling in his legs and sending him into a headlong tumble. "Lady Ambreene!" he puffed, his voice imperious now. "This is most irregular! Your father said nothing about your going out this day, and with the Great Lady Teshla so nea—"
Ambreene did not bother to turn her head. "Did he not? Well, go to him, and he shall tell you—but stand in my path at your peril!" The lie came to her in an easy rush, and she found herself quivering with excitement and anger. No one was going to stop her, not even Lord Piergeiron himself! Grandmama was her only real friend, and Ambreene had no intention of losing such a precious thing, whatever Teshla might think of the time left to her...
Until a few breaths ago, Ambreene Hawkwinter had been powerless to do anything about Grandmama's slow wasting.

But that was before the Eye of the Dragon had come into her hand.

It was beautiful, yes—so beautiful!—and a thing of power besides. But what were those things set against the warmth and wisdom of Grandmama, there to laugh with her, chide her, and teach her the ways of spells, men, and Waterdeep itself? In all the city, men said, there was no mage as mighty as Khelben Blackstaff—and if he could make the dead live and gods whole, he could surely restore one old woman t And he would want this Eye of the Dragon, and doubtless do such a small and kind service in return for it.

Briefly Ambreene thought of how powerful the Eye might make her, and how slow her mastery of magic was sure to be without it—but no. Without Grandmama's direction and teaching, she might never learn to wield even the pendant, let alone spells of her own! She strode down the street, uncaring, as folk stared at the speeding driftglobe and the red-faced old seneschal puffing along after her with a half-dozen smirking, hastily-commanded Hawkwinter armsmen at his heels. She needed only her eyes to head for the dark and distant needle of Blackstaff Tower.

Every child of Waterdeep knew it. The home of a man whose spells were mighty enough to hurl back liches, mind flayers, and beholders all at once, and whose stern justice frightened even proud heads of the richest noble houses. Ambreene knew that too, and quailed inwardly as she marched along. But she was a Hawkwinter, on a truly noble mission—and Ambreene's name might well someday ring down the streets of Waterdeep as grandly as that of Khelbun Arunsun.

She lifted her chin and strode on without slowing. Behind her, the seneschal rolled his eyes and wheezed along. Fear was beginning to show on his face as she passed into the shadow of Blackstaff Tower.

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A single taper flickered in Ambreene's bedchamber as she

shot the door-bolt into place with steady hands, so none could disturb her. Then she hurried to the dusty space behind her wardrobe where she hid her few scraps of magic.
She almost made it. Two paces shy of her secret place the hot tears of rage and grief burst forth, blinding her. She blundered forward, sobbing, until she ran into the wardrobe's polished side and raised trembling fists to strike it, again and again, heedless of the pain.
Khelben had granted immediate audience, and hope had soared like a flame within her until the moment Ambreene had given him her name. He'd looked at her gravely, and uttered words that would burn in her brain forever: "Teshla Hawkwinter? No, child. Not that one. She knows why, and has accepted her death... and so must you."
And that was all he would say, despite her tearful pleadings. At last Ambreene had risen from her knees, lifted her chin, turned in silence, and left, unheralded. He hadn't even looked up from his papers as she'd gone out!
She'd stumbled home, the seneschal and guards treading close around her but not daring to speak, to find all the folk of the house as white-faced as she was. Silence reigned heavily over Hawkwinter House save for muffled weeping behind backchamber doors. The Dowager Lady Teshla Hawkwinter was dead.
The priests of half a dozen temples murmured and chanted around the high-canopied bed and Ambreene hadn't even been allowed in to see what was left of her Grandmama—sleeping forever now, a small and shrunken thing in the great spill of silken pillows—until the haughty strangers were done.
Her father had been there. He had said her name once, gently, and had reached for her—but Ambreene stepped around him and looked upon the Lady Teshla alone and in silence. When she turned to go, her father had signed to the servants not to follow, and for that gentle mercy she must remember to thank him when she could. But not now. Oh,

not now.
She drew herself up in the darkness, an anger boiling in her throat that made her want to scream, rake herself, and break things, and hissed in a voice that fought hoarsely through tears, "I will make you pay for her death, 0 great, grand Lord Mage Khelben Blackstaff Arunsun. Ambreene Hawkwinter will make you plead for aid as I pleaded... and I will show you the same mercy you showed me. This I swear."
Her last words seemed to echo around her, and Ambreene shivered and clung to the wardrobe for support. So this was powerful archmage in all Waterdeep, too. She rang the servants' bell and went to unbolt the door for them. She must get Grandmama's spellbooks and magic things before some maid spirited them away to make fair coin and they were lost. Ambreene had much work to do.
-®- ¦©¦ <S>
A month later, Ambreene stood beside the wardrobe and looked at herself in her glass. A gaunt and hollow-eyed maid with white skin and dark, burning eyes gazed back at her. She knew the servants whispered her wits had been touched by the Lady Teshla's death, but she cared not a whit.
Ambreene was almost ready. Mastery of all the spells in Teshla's books—her books, now—might take years, but the Eye of the Dragon shone openly on her breast, and at night quivered warmly against her skin, whispering to her in her dreams.
All too often the night visions it sent drifted away in smoky tatters, but when her will was strong enough to hold steady to them, they showed her how to command the pendant to take memories ... and to yield its memories up, like the scenes acted out at revels.
As Grandmama had warned, the Eye could drink memories, and when she got the right chance, she'd use it on Khelben to steal his magic. Then she would be a great sorceress, and he'd be left a shambling, slack-jawed idiot. A fitting fate, she'd thought... until that dark day when the pendant

showed her why he'd refused to keep Grandmama alive.
Teshla had been a lush, dark beauty in her youth, all flashing eyes, flowing raven hair, and full, cruel lips . . . and as proud and amoral as any haughty noble. Many men sighed for her, but she saw them as passing fancies to be duped into building her wealth and power. She professed undying love for one wizard—but in her bed, the Eye pressed between them by their bodies and her mouth entrapping his, she'd drained all Endairn's magic away, becoming a mage of power in one night.
With her new-found arts she'd chained him in a dark cellar, bound in spell-silence, and set forth to lure the most cunning merchant of the city to wed her.
Horthran Hawkwinter had been rich indeed. She'd not refused his shower of coins, but it had been his wits she'd wanted, his judgment of folk and knowledge of their pasts, schemes, alliances, and abilities. And it was his wits she'd taken on another night like the first, in the very bed in which she died; a gift from him, seeing its first use. The confused Horthran had been confined to his chambers from then on, visited by Teshla only when she wanted an heir, then another child in case misfortune befell the first.
Ambreene shivered a little as she watched her infant elders set aside in a nursery while Teshla clawed and carved her subtle way to dominance, making the Hawkwinters a grand and respected house in Waterdeep.
She wept when the Eye showed a bored Teshla bringing together her husband and the mindless wizard and goading them into fighting each other for her entertainment. They'd both died—sharing a look of heartfelt gratitude as they stared into each other's eyes and slowly throttled each other.
That look had troubled Teshla, even after she'd had the bodies burned and the ashes scattered at sea by a Hawkwinter ship. Eventually her nightmares had frightened her servants so much that they'd called in the Lord Mage of

Waterdeep . . . and the look Khelben had given her as he stripped away all her spellbooks and things of power except the Eye and left her alone in her turret room had haunted Teshla almost as much as the dying looks of Endairn and Horthran.

Over the long years, Teshla had built up her magic again, scroll by scroll, her coins reaching where she could not, to win for her—often with bloodied blades—magic she dared not seek openly. Her son and heir, Eremoes, grew into a man of wisdom and justice under the best tutors the Hawkwinter coffers could buy, and there had come the day when he'd returned to Hawkwinter House with a new and beautiful wife, the sorceress Merilylee Caranthor of Athkatla.

Seeing her mother clearly for the first time, Ambreene sought Khelben's protection against the Eye. Cloaked in his spell, she tried to seize Teshla's magic for her own.

Eremoes never knew the sorcerous attack on Hawkwinter House that left no trace of his beloved Merilylee, half his servants dead, and the upper floors of the family mansion a shambles was not the work of a rival house at all—but the result of a sorcerous duel between his mother and his wife. A duel Teshla did not lose.

Ambreene wept as she saw herself shielded in her nursery by Teshla's spells. Her Grandmama had chosen Ambreene to be her friend and sorcerous heir from the first, and shaped her into the role as coldly and as calculatingly as anything else she'd set out to do.

Ambreene spent a long night of tears on her knees when ¦she was done seeing all the long, long years of memories the Eye had seen, but when she rose at last, dry-eyed, Khelben's hated face still burned in her mind.

Why hadn't he stopped Grandmama? He was Lord Mage of Waterdeep, and had a duty. Why had he let Ambreene's mother be blasted to nothing, and the Hawkwinters groomed to Teshla's wishes? What, in this uncaring—when he knew her deeds and ambitions, and did nothing—made him any

better than Lady Teshla Hawkwinter?
Nothing. She was gone, leaving behind only spells, the Eye, and shame. But he lived still, and had dismissed Ambreene without even a look, and let the house of Hawkwinter become what Teshla had twisted it into. And her father did not even know...
That very morning Eremoes Hawkwinter had broken his mourning silence and sent forth invitations to a grand feast, to the folk of the Palace and every grand house in the city. And they would come; Hawkwinter hospitality was legendary.
Khelben Arunsun's name was on one of those invitations, and he would come. After Ambreene had told the Lady Laeral that she was thinking of studying magic, and very much wanted to see the Lord Mage of Waterdeep at Hawkwinter House, Laeral would see that he attended.
Ambreene smiled slowly and went to where her spell-
hnnks w»n» hidHpn Thp fpast was a tpndav hpnrp Shp had little time to prepare herself to greet Khelben properly. She suspected it might not be all that easy to make an archmage kill himself.
¦©¦ ¦©¦ ¦©¦
The gate-greetings were done, and the many-colored driftglobes she'd conjured (to her father's smiling approval) were becoming useful as dusk drew down. From a distance, across the dance floor, Ambreene smiled and waved at Laeral as the arriving Lord and Lady Mage of Waterdeep were welcomed by her father—then allowed herself to be swept away into a chalantra by one more would-be suitor.
She'd scarcely recognized herself in the glass when the chamberladies had finished with her, but she could have resembled one of the sacks of unwashed potatoes piled up in the cellars and still been nearly trampled by the attentions of every younger noble son of the city. As the night wore on, Ambreene kept a smile firmly on her face and magic to keep her hair up and her feet just a breath above

the tiles. She wasn't nearly as weary and footsore as she should have been when she slipped away from a sweating Talag Ilvastarr after moonrise and sought somewhere private.

Many couples had stolen away from the laughter, minstrelry, and chatter to enjoy the beauty of the extensive gardens of Hawkwinter House together. A part of Ambreene ached to be giggling and caressing the night away in the arms of a handsome young blade, but she had sworn an oath, the first thing of consequence she had set out to do in her life. Ambreene Hawkwinter would keep her oaths. All her oaths.

Then she was alone in a room that was dark enough. A few gestures and a hissed word and Ambreene's muscles shifted in the loose gown she'd chosen. It felt peculiar, this sliding and puffing, as she became older and fatter, her cheeks and chin chubby, and her hair russet red. Now no suitor would see her as the highly desirable Hawkwinter heiress and press his attentions, or want to dance with her all night.

She smiled grimly into the darkness and went in search of the Lord Mace of Waterdeeo.

He was not on the dance floor, nor in any of the noisy, crowded antechambers that gave off it, where loudly-talking older nobles were busy insulting each other, gossiping, gorging themselves, and drinking themselves silly. Nor was he where Ambreene had expected to find him—the dim, smoky rooms on the floor above, where men who thought themselves wiser and more powerful than their fellow nobles muttered darkly about plots and trade treaties and the dark days ahead for Waterdeep, and added new layers of refinements and pacts to the already labyrinthine entanglements of the city's intrigues.

Ambreene found privacy again and sent a seeking spell on a tour of the bedchambers and servants' rooms that left her blushing and her eyebrows raised ... perhaps permanently. .In one, she found Laeral and her father together, but they

were only talking. Relieved at not having to add the Lady Mage of Waterdeep to the ranks of those she must destroy, Ambreene continued her search, but found no trace of Lord Khelben in all the House.

Finally she farscried him far away across the moonlit gardens, speaking to a succession of young party guests out strolling idly about the grounds. Hmmph. Dispensing wizardly wisdom, no doubt.

Ambreene's eyes narrowed, and she cast another spell. There was a sound like the faint jangle of harp strings, then:

"Grand night, to be sure," someone who was not there said loudly in her ear, "but my gut's rolling like a ship being beached through breakers!"

"It's that wine," another, thinner voice replied. "If you must try to drink the Hawkwinter cellars dry all by yourself..."

So her spell was working, but where was Khelben's voice? Ambreene frowned and bent her will in the wizard's direction.

A third, cheerful voice said, "Fair even, Lor—" then stopped as if cut off by a knife. Ambreene juggled the fading wisps of her first spell into life once more, and saw the man who must have spoken ... a man in a half-cloak, daringly-patterned hose, and a doublet of slashed silk, standing

conversing with Khelben. Gods-be-damned! The wizard must have a shield up to prevent eavesdroppers from hearing what was said!

Her eyes narrowed. What words, at a party, could be so important that they must be hidden from all?

Then she had a sudden thought and sent her clairaudience spell whirling back across Hawkwinter House to the private chamber where Eremoes and Laeral sat.

"Your service to the Harp is as timely and as enjoyable as always," the Lady Mage was saying, "and I want you to know that it is not unappreciated or taken for granted, Lord."

Ambreene blinked. Her father, a Harper? Gods above!

"I know that's not the case," her father replied, "but I must

confess I had my own selfish reason for this gathering..."
"And would this reason be your youngest daughter's growing mastery of magic?" Laeral asked smoothly.
"It would," Eremoes Hawkwinter said. "I know Blackstaff Tower always has more would-be apprentices than either you or Khelben have time for, but if you'd be willing to explore her powers and, I confess, her thoughts and feelings; she's been more affected by my mother's death than her siblings or most folk her age would be ... I'd be most grateful. I cannot hire the right tutor until I know her strengths and interests, and to query her directly would upset her, diminish me in her eyes, and yet fail to yield the truth."
"I can do that in the morning, if you'd like," Laeral said in kindly tones, and Ambreene's prying spell collapsed as she shrieked in fear.
She must act now! Once Laeral poked into her mind, she'd have no secrets left and Khelben might well turn her into a frog or bookend or his slave while she was still whimpering under the Lady Mage's mindprobe...
Trembling in haste, Ambreene shifted her form again. A young woman who was alluring indeed ran from the room, clattered down the closest stair to the gardens, startling couples out of their embraces as she rushed past, and found the moonlight as quickly as she could.
The succession of Harper agents seemed to have finished their business with the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, and for one chilling moment Ambreene thought Khelben was gone from Hawkwinter House, and she'd missed her chance.
Then she caught sight of him in a far corner of the gardens, sitting alone on a bench in the bright moonlight. Pulling the Eye on its chain off over her head, Ambreene held it ready inside a sleeve of her gown, panted until she regained control of her breath, then set off swiftly toward her quarry.
This would be her only chance. To keep her oath, she could not fail now. Ambreene moved as quietly as she could without seeming to creep or stalk. If Khelben turned his

head and saw her, she wanted to look alluring, not like a thief darting guiltily about.
He was stroking his chin as she drew near, and studying the bright belt of stars overhead as if they were telling him something.
"Well met, Lord Wizard," she said enticingly, when she was only a few paces away. She kept her voice low and rich and laced with laughter, like a seductive courtesan she'd once overheard at the Palace entertaining a rich Calishite merchant. "Moonlight becomes thee."
"I believe that last line should be mine, lady," Khelben replied calmly, studying her with eyes that seemed to bore right through her magical disguise.
"I'm young yet," she returned lightly, "and still working on my catalogue of blandishments and flirtations. All Waterdeep knows of your dedication to justice and fidelity to the Lady Laeral, my lord, but I was wondering if you'd mind if a lass who prefers wits and maturity to the empty swaggering of young men practiced a line or two on you, and perhaps grew so bold..."
She leaned near, giving the Lord Mage of Waterdeep a spectacular view of the fine leaping-dragons lace that edged her bodice, and continued slowly and huskily,"... as to share a kiss with me? Something I'd remember fondly and privately, mind, not shout from the rooftops..."
The Lord Mage of Waterdeep regarded her. For a moment, something that was almost a smile seemed to play about his lips. "What precisely did you have in mind, 0 enthusiastic young lady?"
Ambreene let the fullness of her sleeve hold the Eye, and stretched forth that hand for Khelben to see. His eyes flicked from one of her empty, ringless hands to the other as she knelt, so that their eyes were level.
"I am no disguised monster, only a lonely maid," she said in sultry tones, staring invitingly, almost challengingly into his eyes, "and I'd very much like a kiss." She licked her lips and

purred, "I'll submit to whatever magic you want to use, to be sure I'm... safe."
The mage they called The Blackstaff raised an eyebrow. "And why go to all this trouble—possible humiliation and danger—just for one kiss from an old man?"
"I've heard what they say about wizards," she whispered, eyes bright.
He looked swiftly around, as if to be sure that no one else was watching them, and then extended his arms and said, "Come, then, lass, and try whatever you're trying to do..."
Ambreene's eyes narrowed at his choice of words, but the opportunity was too good to pass up. Opening her mouth hungrily, she glided into his embrace, then twisted in his arms, whipping the pendant out and around his neck like a striking snake. The Eye of the Dragon flashed as she snarled, "Take his memories! Take them all! And give them tome!"
The chain tightened cruelly around the mage's throat, but. he only pulled her closer and growled, "You wanted a kiss, remember?"
His lips were warm, but Ambreene shook her head violently and tried to bite him. When her mouth was free, she spat in his face and hissed, "Plead! Plead for your magic, archmage!"
She jerked the chain tight across Khelben's windpipe. He did not turn the purple hue she expected, but only smiled faintly.
"Don't you know what this is?" she snarled, tugging on the chain again.
The wizard nodded. "The Eye of the Dragon," he said calmly. "It's been years, lass, since I've seen it. Well, well..."
"Years?" Confused, Ambreene could barely get the word out through lips that were suddenly twisting and slipping... her face and body were sliding back into their true shape!
The craggy, bearded face so close to hers was melting and shifting too... and when Ambreene saw what it became, the color fled from her face and her teeth began to chatter in

terror.
She'd seen the Old Mage of Shadowdale only once, but the wizard they called Elminster was unmistakable. He grinned at her. "If ye'd live a little longer, lass," he said gently, "never try to bosom thy way up to the real Khelben. He's not that trusting, know ye ... after all, he's had several centuries of comely wenches trying that sort of thing on him, and most of them were his apprentices."
"But...how..."
"Khelben had to hurry back to Blackstaff Tower to work on some Harper business begun here tonight," the Old Mage explained. "Both he and Laeral felt your probing spells—really, lass, take a little more care with such things, eh?—so he called me in to do a little impersonation in case any other Harpers came to report... or ye decided to do something spectacularly stupid."
"And was what I did so stupid?" Ambreene asked with menacing softness, her hands twisting the chain until it cut deep into his throat.
Elminster smiled unconcernedly, and chucked her under the chin as if she were a small girl. "Well, 'twas certainly spectacular..." he murmured, and added, "Iwouldn't wear a gown like that."
He bent his head to her bodice, and peered. "Ah, leaping dragons... Thayan work; very nice."
Ambreene thrust herself against him, hooking her legs around his and pressing as much of herself against Elminster's body as she possibly could. She put her head over his shoulder and dug her chin down with bruising force, holding him with all the strength in her quivering body.
"Now," she said into his ear, "any harmful spell you work on me will hurt you as well. Khelben wronged my Grandmama and my family; my revenge was for him. But your magic will serve me just as well, giving me spells enough to
destroy him another way. Can you feel the memories leaving you?"

"No," Elminster said lightly. "I know how to make the Eye work as its creator intended it to. I'm giving ye only the memories I want ye to have... and keeping them, not letting them drain away."
Ambreene drew back her lips in a disbelieving sneer. "And just how can you do that? Lady Teshla could not, and the Eye hasn't shown me any way to wield it thus! What makes you such an expert?"
Gentle mirth glinted in Elminster's eyes as he said mildly, "Why, lass, I created the thing in the first place. In Myth Drannor, 'twas... in my spare time."
Ambreene shook her head derisively, but said nothing. He was so calm. What if it were true?
Then she gasped and stiffened as the world around her vanished in a flood of memories not her own. Vivid images, all around her as if they were befalling here and now, and she were living them...
She was dimly aware that her nails were raking someone's back, that he was growling protestingly, and that there was a sudden strong smell of pipesmoke, but...
She was standing on the deck of a storm-tossed ship, watching as a grandly-robed man turned his back on his son —who laughed and hurled a bolt of lightning with both. hands that cut his father's body in two and sent the front of the ship boiling up into flames...
Then she was in a bedchamber where a man was pinned to a door with a sword, his life-blood a spreading puddle on the floor, and gasping, "Why, Maruel? Why have you done this?"
"Because I want to," the breathtakingly beautiful woman on the bed said to him with a sneer that matched Ambreene's own, "and at last have the power to. I am the Shadowsil, and from now on I will take what I want, not beg for it!" She raised her hand and waved casually, and the long blade slid out of the man all black with his blood. He crumpled to the floor, gasping, "But I loved... you..."
"And what is that to me, fool?" she laughed. Then the

scene was whirled away and Ambreene was somewhere else again.

A tower where a woman wept with smoke curling away from her empty hands and ashes all around her, while a man sat on empty air not far away and said, "And so your trick has come around to visit itself on thee. Well done, Alatha—oh, well done indeed!"

The woman's raw howl of grief whirled Ambreene away into a scene of a sorceress betraying her tutor, then another ambitious magistress turning to evil and mistakenly slaying the man she loved...

"All of these happened, lass, and I was there to see them," Elminster told her gently. "Have ye such a hunger to join them?"

Ambreene wept and tried to pull away from him, shaking her head and straining to think of things of her own choice ... but her thoughts were dragged ruthlessly back into the whirlwind of revenge, grief, and evil until she was babbling...

"Gods! Oh, gods, stop! Have mercy!" she sobbed.

"Better mercy than ye planned to show Khelben, I hope," the Old Mage said grimly, and abruptly she was seeing a young lass clad only in long, luxurious hair who knelt amid glowing, floating symbols, in a chamber whose dark walls winked with stars.

"Who—?"

"A lady in Myth Drannor, crafting the first foresight spell," Elminster replied. Abruptly the spell poured into Ambreene's own mind, writing itself in runes and whirling concepts of fire. She gasped, gagged, and moaned as her mind stretched dizzily. A very bright light seemed to be rushing through her, and...

"Note that this magic allows thee only to see what lies ahead for others. If thy mind can encompass it and ye stay sane, 'twill become thy most useful tool—and thy great burden," Elminster said, as she blinked and saw his face again in the moonlight, inches from her own.

Gentle hands put the Eye of the Dragon into her hands. "Now... about that kiss..."
Ambreene wept as warm lips brushed hers tenderly and that old, wise voice said, "Thanks for the memories."
Then the old wizard turned away in the moonlight, as she stared after him with eyes that streamed the tears of a thousand years. Elminster strode across the garden and as he went, his battered old boots left the dewy grass and trod on air. Up on emptiness he walked, as if the starry sky were his own private staircase, up over the garden wall and on, over the rooftops of the city.
When she could see him no more, Ambreene looked down at the pendant in her hands. Suddenly it spoke with Elminster's voice and she nearly flung it down in startlement.
"Ah, lass," it said, "be not downcast, for ye heard a-right, what they say about wizards. Put this on whenever ye need to talk to me ... or to Khelben. He's waiting for ye to come and see him."
And from that day until the day the gods willed that Ambreene Hawkwinter die, long years later, the pendant never left her breast.
Introduction
NOTHING BUT TROUBLE
This story recounts just one of thousands upon thousands of merry little incidents in the freewheeling trading life of Mirt the Moneylender of Waterdeep. Another familiar figure of the Realms gets involved in this particular happening, and I should take the opportunity here to emphasize that the tale's end refers not to any impending unfaithfulness to Mirt's beloved Asper, but to an opportunity on the part of Mirt's hostess to get him to do a few unsavory Lord-of-Waterdeep-acting-behind-the-scenes tasks for her.
"Nothing But Trouble," previously seen in the pages of DRAGON magazine, takes place in Water-deep on the evening of the nineteenth of Flamerule in the Year of the

Staff (1366 DR), and illustrates the rather rough-and-ready nature of peace and justice that prevails in the bustling City of Splendors. Volo once angrily commented on this state of affairs upon reading a warning issued by Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun, the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, that advised visitors to the fair city to "avoid disturbing the peace."

Roared Volo: " 'Avoid disturbing the peace?' Of where? If you're not an archmage so powerful that folk quiver like beached jellyfish when you walk by, you'll have a hard time finding any peace in the Realms to disturb! I love my world, but it's a-crawl with strife, and fair Waterdeep is a deadlier corner of it than most. Beware the high-nosed advice of wizards; their grasp of reality is just a wee touch tenuous."

When it comes to grasping reality—and squeezing, hard—fat and aging moneylenders are, of course, so much better at things than wizards. Yes?

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

Mother Teshla's Turret Club for Adventurers was currently the most cozy gathering place for "lads and lasses of the sword" in all the fair city of Waterdeep. Its rooms were crowded with comfortable old chairs to sink into and handy tables to put your boots up on, and there was good wine, better beer, and hot, dripping butter-and-bacon sandwiches to consume. There were even eels in honey sauce. Still slithering, of course.

It would be nice to see Teshie again, after all this time. A certain far-too-generous mage of Shadow-dale had chosen a good place for their meeting. Now, if Khelben didn't get wind of any of this until they were done, things would be just fine. If not...

Mirt the Moneylender shrugged. Disaster would come. He'd learned there was little one could do beyond frantic scrambles to get out of its way. Whatever befell, he'd see Teshie again.

With a smile of ready anticipation on his battered face, Mirt

the Moneylender glanced up at the soft summer stars, beckoned to the cloaked and hooded figure climbing in his wake, and launched himself into one last, lumbering charge up the final flight of the Club's outside stairs.

Mother Teshla's Turret Club had but one drawback: it was in a turret, and turrets tend to involve climbing.

Gauntleted fists punching the air and mail-girt paunch wobbling indomitably, Mirt wheezed his way to the landing, leaned against its low parapet, and gasped for air. When his ragged moustache was no longer whistling in and out, the stout Old Wolf of Waterdeep reached out one metal-clad finger to slide open a cover on the door in front of him, snarled two words into the hole thus revealed, and beckoned again to his cowled follower.

Then he opened the door—to be greeted by a chorus of oaths from the dimness within. Several swords flashed out, seeking his face!

So he grabbed them in his gauntleted hands and hauled, hard.

With startled cries their owners flew past him and over the parapet, headed for a swift rendezvous with the cobbles of the courtyard below.

No sooner had their cries died away than an icy voice from the depths of the room beyond the door asked, "Just why, Mirt, are you killing the proud young nobles of our fair city this time? They were paying promptly for their drinks, mind you—unlike some stout lords I could name!"

"I said the pass-phrase, Teshla," Mirt growled a little sheepishly, "and then gods-be-damned if they didn't attack me!"

He was as smitten at the sight of her as he'd been the first time, two dozen summers ago. She stood just a little taller than the proudest curve of his belly, a slender ramrod of fiery spirit. Her skin was milk-white, her eyes snapping black pools, and her petite form eye-snaring in its liquid grace. She wore purple silk that clung to her slimness in ways that

left nothing to Mirt's always-rampant imagination. His eyes fell to her jeweled cloth-of-gold slippers as he remembered a night when she'd been wearing only purple... but not all that much purple...

" 'Beldarra's buttocks' hasn't been the pass-phrase since two summers ago," Mother Teshla told him even more coldly, coming to the door. Meeting the sharp black points of her eyes as they drew nearer, Mirt began to know just how one of his hogs felt when the butcher came into the swine-yard, knife in hand, and looked its way.

He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a sort of sizzling, rustling sound, like a giant beetle calling to its young.

He might recall Teshie with fondness, but 'twas clear she didn't share his warm memories. Women were different...

"So you've slain three young noblemen of Waterdeep for nothing" Teshla snarled, "in a manner that'll have the Watch up here in less than a candle-down. My thanks, O lion among adventurers. How are you going to put this right?"

Mirt tried to speak again. "Ugluckle!" he said heartily.

"Ugluckle" is the favorite comment Lords of Waterdeep use when confronted by particularly glowing examples of their own stupidity. He tried a smile, but could feel it sliding down off his chin as he met Teshla's waiting gaze. She was a woman whose level stare was capable of making a charging dragon snort and shy away.

Long ago he and Teshla had been lovers, and he'd thought they were still old friends, but right now Mirt was beginning to doubt it. To say nothing of the wisdom of coming here in the first place.

He glanced gloomily down into the courtyard, and found it empty of all but a curious cat, looking back up at him.

Trying not to show how astonished he was, the veteran Lord of Waterdeep gestured grandly down at the empty—and unstained—cobbles below.

"No harm done, Teshie," he boomed. "Look you, and behold!

Three young gallants whisked away to the beds of their beloveds by a little spell we're experimenting with—er, for the security of Waterdeep, y'understand. They'll find a few coins in their palms when they arrive, for their troubles, and all will be well..."

Teshla stormed past him like an angry thundercloud, glanced over the rail, and sniffed.

"Well, I don't know how you did it," she said, looking up from about the level of his belt buckle with her eyes still afire, "but I want no more 'experimental spells'—or slain patrons—this time, 0 lovelight of my past. You may as well come in... you and your silent friend."

Glancing at the silent, cowled figure, she turned back to the door, then added over her shoulder as she went in, "Oh, yes: the pass-phrase just now is idiot come calling.' Nothing personal, you understand."

"Er, no. No, of course not," Mirt rumbled heartily to the empty doorway. Then he beckoned the hooded figure impatiently and strode into the Turret Club.
Teshla had vanished. He was standing in a room that held several unshaven, sour-looking men. All of them were bristling with weapons, all of them were glaring at him, and none of them wore friendly looks.
"Be ye thinking of sitting down here, Old Wolf?" a man with an eyepatch asked with a crooked smile as his pet snake slithered lazily up one arm. "I'd think again, if I were you."
"And I'd wish I'd kept my mouth shut, Bollard," Mirt rumbled serenely, as he casually planted his right boot deep into the shadowed flesh under the man's protruding belly, "if I were you."
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There are seasoned adventurers in Faerun who can laugh in the face of disaster, grin merrily at swift-approaching, certain death, and shrug and walk away from calamity. Bollard was not one of them.
He fought briefly for breath enough to scream, but managed only a sort of whistle. Looking pale and haggard under his thick coat of pimples, Bollard tried again. He uttered a sort of rattling groan and, liking the sound of it, gave vent to another.
"Anyone else have something clever to say this even?" Mirt inquired jovially, looking around the room
No one spoke, and no one met his eyes. With a loud snort, the stoutest Lord of Waterdeep swaggered across the room to its far door, the hooded figure following him silently.
No swords greeted him when he opened this door, which was almost something of a disappointment. Almost.
Instead, he found himself facing a purplish, midair shimmering that he recognized as a curtain of silence. Beyond it, a young woman who hadn't managed to put on all that many clothes before starting work was dancing

around a certain table. The table named for the meeting he'd come here for. The table where one of his oldest enemies was unexpectedly sitting.

Truly the gods seemed to be smirking at Mirt the Moneylender tonight.

Orgaz the Boar had cold eyes, ruthless habits, and two protruding lower teeth or tusks that had inspired his nickname. He also had several score thousand gold coins of Mirt's money, a fast ship that some critics had dubbed the home of "the dirtiest Sword Coast pirate unhung," and an arsenal of personal spells that had kept him safe from the Old Wolf and several dozen other creditors. But right now, he had his back turned.

Mirt grinned and sidled forward, like a large stone pillar trying to glide stealthily across a room. The radiance of the magical curtain flickered as he passed through it, and Orgaz turned his head.

Knife already in hand, Mirt smiled tightly and threw. The blade flashed through the air and bit deep, pinning the Boar's hand to the table. The hand that had been darting toward the wand that Mirt's second knife now sent flying.

"Well met, old miser," Mirt rumbled, striding forward.

Orgaz stared back at him, looking as stunned as a knight who's dug in his spurs and roared at his horse to charge—only to have it turn its head and calmly inform him that it isn't in the mood just now, thank you.

The dancing girl watched dagger and wand flash past her, stopped singing huskily, and tried screaming instead—with immediate and impressive success.

Mirt had just time to sit down at the table beside Orpaz and swing his feet up onto a nearby vacant chair before the noise the girl was making brought Mother Teshla back into the room.

"Stop that," Teshla snapped, poking the maiden's supple—and bare—stomach with one bony finger.

The maiden shuddered, but did not cease her screams. Mirt

winced. Her shrieks were reaching notes that needed to have a fast brace of arrows fired through them... or some intrepid adventurer to leap off a turret, catch hold of their rising cacophony, and wrestle it to the ground until the Watch came along to cart them down to the harbor and drown 'em deep.

Teshla evidently thought so too, for she deftly snatched up a tablecloth, tossed it over the maiden's head, and followed it with a hard-swung chair. The girl toppled in sudden silence.

"Mirt, if you've been attacking my guests—" Teshla began threateningly, as she lowered the girl's shrouded form to the floor.

"Nay, nay, Teshie. I've only just sat down! Orgaz here has kindly caught one o' me blades that fell from its sheath as I approached," Mirt assured her.

"I'm sure," Teshla replied, in a tone of voice that a noble lady of Waterdeep might use to tell a servant that a giant tick seemed to have somehow found its way into her salad.

She glanced at Orgaz. He still looked decidedly like a corpse that had been floating in Waterdeep Harbor for several hot days, but at least it was now a corpse that had decided to try smiling. Slowly.

"When you're done, would you kindly clean the blood off my table?" she asked him.

Orgaz, who'd managed to say nothing thus far, continued to do so, but nodded hastily, looking at Teshla, then across the table at Mirt.

Chin resting in one hairy hand, Mirt gave him a kindly smile. He was dreaming of Orgaz sliding helplessly down a steep and slippery castle turret roof, crying out for Mirt to throw him something—and Mirt obliging with the only portable thing in the room: a full chamberpot.

Orgaz gulped at Mirt's wolfish grin, looked back at Teshla, and chirped, "Take me with you. Downstairs."

Downstairs was where Teshla sold disguises and equipment to needy adventurers. She gave the Boar a look of disbelief,

then got up, yanked Mirt's dagger out of the pirate's hand, and plucked at his sleeve. Yowling in pain, Orgaz was dragged from the room in the space of a swiftly-drawn breath.

Wiping his bloody dagger clean on the tablecloth that covered the fallen dancing maiden, Mirt sighed and turned to the cowled figure. "None too soon, that. Sit down, lad. Elminster'll be here right soon, now."

"I'm here already," the chair Orgaz had been sitting in said rather testily as it started to shift its shape. "Long enough ago, in fact, to keep three young nobles from spreading their brains all over yonder courtyard. If ye carved any wider a path through the good citizens of Waterdeep, Old Wolf, ye'd soon have nobody left to be Lord over!"

"No doubt, no doubt," Mirt grunted, "but I'm running late, just now. Could you save the lecture and see to the lad, here?" He grabbed the sleeve of the cowled figure and rumbled, "Unhood, Bergos."

Obediently the figure pulled back its cowl and blinked at the mightiest mage in Faerun. Elminster looked back at him and sighed. Being born wealthy and noble doesn't make a young man handsome, polite, or gallant, but the young man seldom realizes this.

The eyes of young Bergos were bulging and staring, and his cheeks were as red as the embers of a roaring hearthfire.

Mirt took one look at him and reached for the nearest decanter. He was in love, all right. This would be, let's see, the third time this summer that Bergos Brossfeather had fallen into eternal, undying love with a young noble lady of Water-deep. Er, if it was a young noble this time. Or a lady.

"He's smitten," Mirt growled. "Some foe cast a spell on him that makes him lovesick. He falls helm over heels for someone new every time there's a new moon. I need him cured. Politics." The Lord of Waterdeep held up his decanter thoughtfully. Ever a glutton for punishment, he stared at himself in its reflective depths.

The Brossfeathers owed Mirt rather more gold pieces than what Waterdhavian nobles called a "thousand thousand" (usually with white faces, gulps, and pursed lips). If Bergos, who'd signed the deeds of debt, didn't come to his senses, Mirt would have to tear Brossfeather House apart stone by stone to see his money back. And that would make him enemies in almost every noble family in Waterdeep. 'Twas already his busy season; Mirt didn't feel like welcoming that many foes just now.

"Who is it right now, Bergos?" Elminster asked quietly, moving his fingers ever so slightly.

The young nobleman grew still, his staring eyes seeing someone not in the room.

The Old Mage nodded as if he could see that someone, too. Then his face seemed to melt and run, dissolving slowly into the features of a young, sapphire-eyed lady with a sparkling grin.

"The things I do for Waterdeep," Elminster growled as Bergos flung himself across the table to embrace his newly revealed love. From under a rain of kisses, the mage growled, "Ye owe me one, Mirt."

In a conjured voice that only the old merchant could hear, the great mage added, "I'm probably going to have to keep us both hidden and act like a little spitfire for a month or more to cure him. The spell's a good one; just smashing it would leave his mind in ruins. D'ye know what better things I could be doing, with an entire month?"

"Wait!" the Old Wolf rumbled, as wizard and ardent young noble began to fade away together. "Who cast the love-spell on Bergos?"

"She did," Elminster replied, pointing, before he was entirely gone.

Mirt spun around, following the Old Mage's pointing finger.

Teshla was standing in a doorway, hands on hips. She was smiling brightly—an expression often assumed by women engaged in slipping something past the wits of their loved

ones.
"Hello, Old Wolf," she said huskily.
Mirt got up hastily, decanter in hand. "Why, Teshie? Why'd you do it?"
"It finally got you here, didn't it?" she replied, a familiar flame kindling in her eyes. As she glided forward, humming a tune he remembered, Mirt wondered if Elminster had left behind another teleport to save him if he dived into the courtyard...
"No," Teshla told him a little smugly, "He did not. He even laid this spell on me, to let me read your mind. You can't escape me any longer, Old Wolf. Sit down."
"Oh," Mirt replied a little faintly. "Oh, well..."
And he sat down.
Introduction
THE GRINNING GHOST OF _TAVERTON HALL
This tale stars—if that's the right word—Glarasteer Rhauligan, a "dealer in fine turret tops and spires" (that is, the head of a small crew of stonemasons, slatecutters, and roofing-tile makers who specialize in stylishly "topping fortress towers" for high, negotiated fees) who's really a Purple Dragon Highknight high in the regard and service of the Crown ofCormyr.
Glarasteer is a hardy man of action who also appears in Cormyr: A Novel and Death of the Dragon, and features prominently in the novel Elminster's Daughter, as well as "The Long Road Home," collected herein.
The story that follows isn't all that much of a mystery, but more the sort of "investigation" romp (Highknights are closer to James Bond than to Sherlock Holmes) I'd happily write dozens of, just for fun. It also affords us glimpses of Cormyrean high society and judicial politics in the latter days of the reign of Azoun IV, and even extends to an Elminster joke. Its action commences on 26 Elesias, in the Year of the Banner (1368 DR).
The ever-voluble Volo had this to say about Highknights and

similar agents of various rulers in Faerun: "Priests claim to be guided by all-knowing gods; kings and lords swear they take the advice of both priests and wise councilors, and in any case know 'their' lands and demesnes better than any other living being; and magistrates and the myriad arms of the law throughout the Realms claim to make wise and right judgments. So given all of this, just why is it that keeping any kingdom lurching along requires so much work on the part of various knights, courtiers, and wizards? Including, let it be said, fighting full-scale wars all too often. Is everyone from the gods on down delusional, or blind to the unfolding Realms around them—or just plain incompetent at handling anything beyond standing up and tottering out to the jakes first thing in the morning?"

THE GRINNING GHOST OF TAVERTONHAIX

Xhe ghost is one of the family, you see. The Doom of the Paertrovers. We couldn't banish him if we wanted to."

The young lord was in full fettle, his voice as polished as that of any master bard. Immult Greiryn, the seneschal of Taverton Hall, ran an irritated hand through his steel-gray hair and turned away, melting into the deep underbrush with practiced ease and silence. Not for him the fripperies of the high and mighty, nor was it his station to be seen listening or intruding when they were at play. Bad enough that he had to step around their bodyguards behind every second tree and bush.

It was late in the warm summer of the Year of the Banner, and a busy summer it'd been, to be sure. All sun-dappled season long three ambitious noble lords of rising power had dragged their

beautiful daughters the length and breadth of the realm, seeking suitable—that would mean rich, Greiryn reflected with a sour smile—husbands for their precious Flowers of Northbank. Farrowbrace, Huntingdown, and Battlebar. Oh, the three ladies were a delight to look upon, even for an old soldier, and well-educated to boot, but their whole

journeying was so .. . calculated. Did these noble lords have iced wine in their veins, instead of blood?
Immult spat thoughtfully onto a fern and traded cold and level gazes with yet another bodyguard whose gloved fingers were fondling the hilt of his dagger. Arrogant lapdogs, lording it over him in a garden that was his to defend!
Arrogant? Aye, and their masters were worse. In their foray up and down the realm, presenting their young ladies to the eligible young noblemen of Cormyr, they'd passed the gates of Taverton Hall thrice. At least. More times, perhaps. Oldest and smallest of the great estates in Northbank this might be, but these three oh-so-noble lords must have been saving it for last, like a favored food at a feast. Taverton Hall was the seat of Lord Eskult Paertrover, Baron of Starwater and Horse Marshal to the Crown of Cormyr, bluest of the old blood houses to currently hold important court rank. Any lass who wed his son and heir, young Lord Crimmon, would gain her father an important ear at court.
Oh, yes, a very important ear. Doddering and lost in nostalgic glories Lord Eskult might well be, but his hand wrote the orders that conferred court ranks—and monies and powers with them—upon nobles, and assigned other nobles standing garrisons of Purple Dragons. Soldiers one had to feed and that were always, so the suspicions went, in your home to keep an eye on you for the Crown. So one lot of nobles gained wealth and power and another saw their purses go flat under the weight of a lot of hungry, swaggering soldiers. Yes, there were many nobles who made a point of being "old friends" of Lord Eskult. Many a case of fine wine came in through the gates at feast days. Immult licked his lips at the memory of a particularly fiery sherry from a Rowanmantle winehall.
Another guard glared at him suspiciously, but the seneschal swept past him, pretending not to notice. Bah! Let these dogs snarl. They'd all be gone from here soon enough.

"Yet," Lord Crimmon said earnestly, knowing he had their breathless attention, "the ghost always reappears." He gave them a suitably ghostly half-smile, and broke his pose to gesture grandly at a rather crumbling expanse of old, close-fitted stones. The rings on his fingers sparkled like miniature stars as the warm light of morning caught them and set them afire.

"Here, 'tis seen as a shape on the wall, no matter how often Paertrovers tear down these stones and rebuild with new ones." He waved his glittering hand again, in a wide circle above his head, three pairs of beautiful eyes following his every move. "Everywhere else on the estate, folk see a floating, grinning face in a long-plumed helm." He gave them the smile again, knowing just how dashingly handsome—and rich—he looked. "It quite put my father off courting in these gardens."

"And has it had the same effect on you, Lord Crimmon?" Lady Shamril Farrowbrace's voice was a low, throaty purr. Her large, dark eyes held his with a look that was more promise than challenge, as one of her slim hands played in apparent idleness with the glistening string of silver-set pearls that adorned her open bodice.

"Lady," the young lord told her in mock reproof, "that would be telling rather more than it is good for the nobly bred to know."

One elegant eyebrow arched on the brow of another of the three Flowers. "Because it ruins the game, Lord?" the Lady Lathdue Huntingdown asked. "Do you seek to slight our sport, or just that of our over-reaching sires?"

Lady Chalass Battlebar stiffened, eyes flashing for a moment as she gathered herself to take proper offense. Her head snapped around to see just where her father was and found that he and the other elder lords had strolled out

of sight, their bodyguards drifting off in their wake. The remaining guards had carefully situated themselves just out of earshot of normal converse, but quite within hailing

distance. She relaxed, turned back to face Lord Crimmon—he was an engaging rogue, not the thickskull or dribblechin one might expect to find as heir of an old-blood house—and smiled.

"For my part," she told them all lightly, "I care not if my lord father dies of old age snooping behind every stone in Cormyr for a 'suitable' mate for me. I have no interest in courtship at all this fine summer. Dalliance, now . . ." She lowered her lashes delicately as she put the tip of one slender, long-nailed finger to her lips and licked it with slow languor.

"Oh, Challa, a little subtlety, please," the Lady Shamril sighed. "There'll be plenty of time for thrusting ourselves at our gracious host here—and his father or yours, for that matter—when the dancing begins. I was enjoying the tale. 'Tis a change from gallant young lords showing us their prized stallions and making clumsy, leering jokes about riding, and wanting to see our saddles, and all the rest of it."

She waved a disgusted hand and all three Flowers tittered together at shared memories that were obviously strong enough to dash away the irritation that had flashed across the face of Lady Chalass under Shamril's chiding.

"Yes," Lady Lathdue Huntingdown agreed, leaning forward in real eagerness rather than with the slower flourish she'd performed earlier to best display her jeweled pectoral. "Our fathers may be after an ear at court and the warehouses of Paertrover gold, but we—I think I can safely speak for all of us in this—are not hunting husbands. Yet."

She caught the eyes of both other ladies, saw their agreement, and confirmed it with a nod that set her splendid fall of hair rippling along her shoulders—then abruptly dropped courtly manners to address Lord Crimmon plainly. "Crimmon, tell us more of your 'grinning ghost.' I love a good scare."

The young lord shrugged, suddenly weary of showing off the family haunting like some sort of trophy of the Hall.

"There's little more to tell. I don't make up stories about him just to impress."
"We've come a long way, Lord," the Lady Shamril purred. "Impress us just a little... please?"
"Will we see the Grinning Ghost?" Lady Lathdue asked directly, her eyes very large and dark. She leaned forward even farther, so like a hound eager for the hunt that Lord Crimmon had to smile.
Into the spirit of it once more—if that was not too dangerous an expression, given the subject—he leaned forward to almost touch noses with her, the sparkle back in his eyes, and half whispered, "So if you're anywhere about our grounds, and feel a gaze upon you, turn around. As like as not, you'll be staring into the twinkling eyes of the ghost, who's been floating along right behind you!"
Two of the Flowers gave little embarrassed cries of fright. The third—Lathdue—uttered not a sound, but Crimmon saw a shiver travel the length of her shapely shoulders and arms. Her dark eyes never left his as he lowered his voice again and went on.
"He never says a word and does nothing but follow folk who scream and flee." The young noble made a grand gesture, as if thrusting desperately with a sword. "Some have dared to attack him or charge straight through him. All such say they felt a terrible chill. . . and got a true fright when the smile ran off the ghost's face like a cloak falling from someone's shoulders.*'
Lord Crimmon left time for another chorus of delicious moans of fear, and added more soberly, "When he's watching you but not grinning, they say 'tis a sign you stand in mortal danger."
The three ladies laughed lightly in dismissal of such a ridiculous notion—how could a spirit know the fates and troubles of the living?—but their host did not join in their mirth, and it died away weakly as they looked into his face.
The gray Paertrover eyes that had seemed so dancing but a

moment before were dark and level as they stared past the Flowers at something that was making the color slowly drain out of Lord Crimmon's face. The three ladies spun around ... and joined in the deepening silence.

Floating behind them, perhaps three paces away, was a disembodied head, its face pinched and white and the plumes of the long helm that surrounded it playing about slightly in the breeze. Its eyes were fixed on Lord Crimmon's and its face was expressionless. And yet, for all that lack of expression, somehow sad and grim. All at once it began to fade away, becoming a faint part of the sun-dappled light, then a gentle radiance among shadows... and then nothing at all.

Silent servants deftly lit the lanterns as the evening shadows lengthened and the nobles rose from their joyous feast, goblets in hand, to stroll in the gardens. Lord Eskult was in rare good humor, his wit as sharp as it had been twenty years past, and so were his guests, brightened by good food, fine wine, and the success of their trade-talks. Even if their does ran with no Paertrover stag, it seemed they'd won a firm friend in the old Horse Marshal.

" 'Stroardinary!" Lord Belophar Battlebar boomed, the force of his breath blowing his great moustache out from his full lips. "A maze, but only knee-high. And sunken, too!"

"The pride of my dear departed wife," Lord Eskult said, striding forth down its grassy entrance path with a gesture that told all Cormyr that he was proud of it too. "She wanted a maze like—no, better-than one she saw at some merchant's house in Selgaunt, but she never wanted to get lost in it. One evening the light fell fast, and she couldn't find her way out before it was full dark. Well, she had a proper fright, and when she found some of the lamp-lads she marched straight out to the garden sheds and took up a scythe, panting and blowing out her nostrils like a charger after a good gallop, and set to work hewing. She fell asleep sometime before dawn and I carried her in, bidding the

morning servants to continue what she'd begun: cutting the highthorn down to the height you see it now. No one will ever get lost in Maeraedithe's Maze again!"
"Gods above," Lord Hornsar Farrowbrace exclaimed admiringly, "what a tale! What a woman! I can just see her, eyes afire—"
"Yes" their host said, spinning around, "They were. They were indeed! Oh, she was splendid!"
Trailing along somewhere in the shadow of the tall and patrician Lord Corgrast Huntingdown, his daughter, the Lady Lathdue, rolled her eyes unto the darkening heavens. Lord Crimmon patted her arm and grinned. She realized who was reassuring her and gasped in horror at having slighted his dead mother, even unintentionally—but he waved in merry dismissiveness as they all strolled on into the maze together. The twisting coil of stunted highthorn entirely filled a sunken square of rich green turf surrounded on all sides by a rising slope of flowers crowned by fruit trees. Behind the trees was a stone wall, pierced in the center of each of its four runs by a stair leading down into the maze. Benches and statues stood here and there among the flowers, some of them already adorned with lamps, but there were none in the maze itself. "This is beautiful," Lady Chalass Battlebar murmured. "Did you ever play here, Crimmon?"
There was no reply. She turned to see what might be preventing him from speaking, only to see him a good twenty paces off, taking a goblet and decanter from a gleaming tray carried by a servant. "He moves swiftly when he wants to," Lady Shamril commented to Chalass.
"Hmmph," she replied, "not as swiftly as I want to." With a nod of her head she indicated the four older nobles in front of them.
"Well, if I ran Cormyr—" Lord Farrowbrace was saying, apparently unconscious of the fact that the nobility of the realm uttered that phrase even more often than the gently born, a rung down the social ladder, discussed the weather.

Lord Huntingdown and their host were both interrupting him, gesturing airily with flagons almost as big as their heads, to illustrate how, begging his indulgence, they'd be like to run Cormyr just a tad differently, thus and so...

"Gods," Shamril muttered, "let's get gone! They'll start talking about which noble houses will rise and which will fall when a new king takes the throne, next."

"That brings to mind the solemn question upon which the future of fair Cormyr stands," Lord Battlebar boomed. "Who among us shall rise and who fall, if Azoun—gods preserve and keep our king—should die tomorrow?"

The three Flowers groaned in unison as Shamril spread her hands in a disgusted "I told you so" gesture. "Shall we be off after Crimmon?" she hissed. "They'll be at this all night, given wine enough! I—"

"No," Lady Lathdue said with a dangerous smile, laying a hand on Shamril's arm. "No running away now! We've a wager, remember? I want to see our fathers' faces when we make a play not for Crimmon, but for his father! Where will they look? After all, the Baron as son-in-law—albeit one old enough to sire them—gives them more power at court and a shorter wait for the gold, if they can bend him into parting with coins before Crimmon does, or the grave takes him!"

"The wager was for the most daring way to steal a kiss from old Eskult," Chalass reminded her with a frown. "I don't want to cross my father! He'll flail half the flesh off my behind ifldisgr—"

"In front of our fathers is the most daring way!" Shamril said with sudden enthusiasm. "Ladies, watch me!" She strode away through the maze, catching up her gown to unconcernedly step over walls of highthorn and catch up with the four lords. Chalass and Lathdue stared at her progress with mingled apprehension, awe, and delight.

"She's going to do it," Lathdue said in low tones, as if pronouncing doom fast coming down upon them all. "0, gods above."

It was coming down to full night now, but the lamps gave light enough to clearly show what befell at the heart of the maze. They saw Shamril glide past Battlebar and her own father, duck under Lord Huntingdown's arm—Lathdue erupted in swiftly smothered giggles at the look of horrified astonishment on her father's face at the sudden, bobbing appearance of a young lady clad in a very scanty green silk gown from under his own languidly wavine
arm—and come up to Lord Eskult Paertrover.

The Baron of Starwater chuckled at whatever Shamril said then, and proffered his arm with exaggerated gallantry. Rather than surrendering her own arm, the young Lady Shamril spun past the old lord's hand to press herself against him, lace-cloaked breast to medal-adorned chest and thigh to thigh. Lord Eskult looked surprised, but pleasantly so. His teeth flashed in a smile as she raised her lips, obviously demanding a kiss, and he bent over her as if he were a young brightblade and not an old and red-faced baron of the realm.

Chalass bit her knuckle to keep from screaming in delight as Shamril stretched her white throat a trembling inch or two farther, ignoring a startled oath from her father. Lathdue shook her head, murmuring, "Crimmon should be watching this! His father's got more than a bit of the old fire in his veins yet, I—"

A sharp snapping sound echoed through the soft evening air, followed by the vicious hum of a crossbow bolt snarling through the air toward the two trembling bodies. It seemed to leap out of the gloomy air like a bolt of black lightning, stabbing between old lord and young, playful lady.

Blood burst forth in a sudden, wet torrent as the bolt took Shamril through the throat. Hair danced as her head spun around with a horrible loose wobble. The Flower of House Farrowbrace made a bubbling sound—the last sound she'd ever utter—as the bolt hummed on across the garden, plucking her out of the old lord's grasp to fall sprawled

across the highthorn, a limp and bloody bundle.
Eskult stared at his own empty hands for an instant, blinded by the bright blood that was fountaining everywhere—then clutched at his chest, made a sound that was half roar and half sob, and toppled slowly, like a felled tree, to crash down on his face in the highthorn.
There was an instant of shocked and disbelieving stillness before the shouts and screams began. With one accord, everyone present turned to stare at where the bolt must have been fired from—and the shouts were cut off as if by a sword. Stunned silence returned.
A head could be seen above the weaponless, otherwise deserted stretch of garden wall they were all staring at. It looked for all the world as if it had just risen up from behind the wall to peer at the carnage below in grinning satisfaction. Teeth flashed white and fierce in its chalk-white face, luminous beneath the dark helm it wore. The Grinning Ghost of Taverton Hall was smiling again.
It grinned at them over the garden wall for the space of two of Lathdue's long and quivering breaths before it abruptly sank from view behind the wall. As if that had been a signal, folk stirred all around the sunken garden. There was a ragged roar, then servants and bodyguards were sprinting toward the wall, swords and belt-knives out. Even Lord Battlebar, down in the maze, plucked at his own knife and crashed across the highthorn in a lumbering run.
Chalass and Lathdue, white-faced, could only stare in silent horror. However fierce and grim the pursuit was now, as men converged on the garden wall in a frantic rush, it was too late for Shamril. Her daring was stilled forever. It might well also be too late for Lord Eskult Paertrover.
Chalass sagged soundlessly to her knees, staring at the two bodies as servants hurried to kneel over them, but Lathdue sobbed suddenly and loudly, and spun around to sprint after the rushing bodyguards. That crossbow had been fired from just where they'd seen the ghost, and—

Panting, she charged up the stair from the sunken garden and turned at its head, almost falling in her haste. A hand in livery caught her arm to steady her, and she swallowed, gasped for breath, and fell silent again.

There was no sign of the Grinning Ghost of Taverton Hall. A grim ring of men with drawn steel in their hands stood around the spot where the crossbow had been fired. It dangled, string loose, in the hands of Lord Crimmon Paertrover. His sword glittered in his other hand, beneath a face that was white and empty. His eyes stared past Lathdue, unseeing.

"Everyone I love . . . taken from me," he blurted—and fell forward on his face, even faster than the rough hands that snatched away his blade and caught at his arms. As half Faerun rushed down on the voune lord. Lathdue felt a deener

darkness than night rise up around her and close its merciful grasp over her eyes.

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"Any man may say he has business with Lord Paertrover. To gain entry here, many a beggar and old soldier has said as much. His friend and secret business partner you may be, too—but I know you not."

The old seneschal's voice was cold and his stare was as wintry as a blizzard howling across the Stonelands, but the man across the table from him smiled with easy affability and replied, "Neither do I know you, goodman, but has that ever been a barrier between men of goodwill? You have the look of a retired Purple Dragon, and I respect all who've fought to keep our fair land safe. Might I know your name?"

"Greiryn," the bristle-browed man on the far side of the table said shortly. "Seneschal of Taverton Hall."

The stout man with the shaggy sideburns bounded from his seat to stretch a welcoming hand across the tabletop, for all the world as if he were the host, and not the visitor. "Glarasteer Rhauligan, dealer in turret tops and spires," he

boomed. "No embattlement too small, no embrasure too large, no crenellation too eccentric. If you can draw it, I can build it! I've come from bustling Suzail itself, turning my back on insistent barons and eager knights alike, to keep my appointment with the Lord Eskult Paertrover." He gestured imperiously with the hand that Greiryn had been ignoring and added firmly, "I do have an appointment."

"Saw you the black banner?" the seneschal asked in grim and reluctant tones. Rhauligan shrugged in a "no, but what of it?" gesture, and Greiryn said icily, "My Lord lies dead in the family crypt, of heartstop, and won't be seeing anyone. Good day to you, merchant."

The fat man in silks and furs made another imperious gesture, more hastily this time. "His son, then," Rhauligan said eagerly, "the young blade who makes half the ladies in Cormyr swoon and the rest sigh! He'll be Lord Paertrover now, right?"

"If he lives to take any title," Greiryn replied in tones of doom that were almost drowned out by the sudden blare of a hunting horn sounding from the gates.

He rose at the sound, reaching for his cloak. "You must excuse me—that will be a Wizard of War, sent from Suzail to see to Lord Crimmon's fate."

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The royal arms gleamed on the door of the coach even through the swirling road dust. Rhauligan counted no less than sixteen black horses in its harness, stamping and tossing their heads impatiently as that regal door opened and a man in stylish robes of lush purple alighted.

The servant with the hunting horn blew a too loud, wandering-note flourish, and the newcomer didn't trouble to hide his wince and frown. He extended his left hand in a fist, displaying a ring to the already-bowing seneschal, and snapped his fingers.

In answer to this signal, a servant still hastening out of the coach proclaimed grandly, "All hail and make welcome Lord

Jalanus Westerbotham, Scepter of Justice, Dragonfang Lord Investigator for Northbank, Starwater, and the Western Coast!"

The figure in purple inclined his head in coldly distant greeting to the three noble lords, swept past them and their daughters, ignored Rhauligan and a hastily-arrayed lineup of household servants, and strode toward the pillared entry of Taverton Hall. The seneschal practically sprinted to catch up with him, holding his ceremonial sword at one hip. Rhauligan gave Greiryn a cheerful grin as he puffed past and was rewarded with a fierce scowl.

"Lord Jalanus!" the seneschal gasped, trying to smile, "be welcome indeed in Taverton Hall. A sad occasion calls you here, but I'm sure that your stay nee—"

"Where, man, are my quarters? " the War Wizard demanded in tones that Rhauligan promptly—and privately—dubbed "coldly patrician."

"Ah, we've prepared the Ducal Suite for you, milord,"

Greiryn said, waving a hand down the central hallway. "It's just ahead there; that door where the servants are waiting."

"I must see to its suitability, and theirs," Lord Jalanus said in a voice that managed to combine equal parts irritation at having to deal with dunderheads and gloomy anticipation of personal hardship and disappointment to come. He drew a slim, shiny black wand from his belt with a flourish, and marched off down the hall.

His servants streamed after him, pushing past Glarasteer Rhauligan on both sides. The merchant staggered first to the left then to the right under their bruising impacts, then shrugged and thrust out his foot, sending a heavily-laden servant crashing on to his face. Deftly he snatched up two carrychests from the chaos that had been the servant's high-stacked load, and joined the general rush down the hall. A ragged shout followed him, and as he turned to enter the Ducal Suite, an angry hand plucked at his sleeve.

"Hey, now, you—"

"Come, come, man," Rhauligan said grandly, "make yourself useful. Lord Wetterbottom seems to have brought no end of clobber with him up the short road from Suzail. Stir yourself to carry some of it, as I have!"
"You—"
Greiryn's face swung into view, lit with fury, and over his shoulder looked Lord Jalanus, boredom and withering scorn now vying for supremacy on his features.
"Merchant!" the seneschal snapped, "surrender those chests at once! I'll have you thrown out of the Hall—with coachwhips!—if you aren't gone by the time our esteemed guest is settled! Do you hear?"
"Along with everyone in southern Cormyr," Rhauligan murmured mildly, extending his arms and dropping both chests on the highly-polished toes of Greiryn's best boots. "But to hear, I fear, is not always to obey."
"It is among servants at court," the War Wizard sneered as Immult Greiryn uttered a strangled shriek, bending over to clutch at his toes.
Rhauligan gave him a broad smile. "That's not what Vangey—oh, the Lord Vangerdahast to you, no doubt—is always complaining to me. Why, j—"
"Guards!" roared the seneschal, face creased in pain. "Arrest this man! He—"
"Will go quite quietly, once this is all settled and I can keep my appointment with the surviving Lord Paertrover," Rhauligan said, stepping swiftly back against a wall as the heavy clump of hastening boots rang down the hallway. "I must be present when Wetterbottom here listens to all the evidence and goes with his spells to interro—er, interview my future client."
"Oh?" The War Wizard put out an imperious hand to silence Greiryn and push him aside, and his tones were silky as he advanced to face the stout merchant nose to nose, bringing his other hand up with slow menace to show the entire hallway of staring guards and servants the ornate and heavy

rings that gleamed and glittered on his fingers. "By what bold right, man, do you make such insistence?"
Glarasteer Rhauligan smiled easily and reached into the open front of his loose shirt.
"Before you do anything rash," Lord Jalanus added quickly, "I must remind you that there are laws in fair Cormyr, and that I, 'Wetterbottom' or not, am sworn to uphold them. I need no court to mete out final—fatal—justice." One of the rings he wore flashed once, warningly.
"Your slumbers must be troubled," Rhauligan replied in tones of gentle pity as he slowly drew forth something small and silver on a chain, holding it cupped in his hand for only the wizard and Greiryn to see. It was a rounded, silver harp: the badge of a Harper. "I have also come here from Suzail," the merchant told them softly, and leaned forward to add in a very loud whisper, "and I was sent by someone very highly placed in court."
The War Wizard's eyes flickered and he spun around with an angry flourish. "Admit him to my investigations," he snapped at the seneschal—then wheeled around again to add curtly to Rhauligan, "Cross not my authority in the smallest way. Your presence I'll grant, but you are to be silent and refrain from meddling. Understand?"
Rhauligan spread his hands. "Your words are clarity and simplicity itself."
Lord Jalanus glared at him for a long moment, sensed nothing more was forthcoming, and turned on his heel again without another word. The merchant favored his retreating back with a florid court bow that made one of the servants snigger. Greiryn's head snapped up to glare, but the culprit, whoever it was, lurked somewhere in the stonefaced ranks of the wizard's own servants, not the folk of the Hall.
Rhauligan smiled fondly at him. "As Lord Wetterbottom seems to need the entire Ducal Suite, could you open the Royal Rooms for me? Hmmm?"
The seneschal's hands came up like trembling claws,

reaching for Rhauligan's throat, before more prudent thought stilled them. More anonymous titters were heard, and this time, some of them came from the servants of the Hall.

"The day," Rhauligan remarked to the world at large as he strode off down the hallway, "does not seem to be proceeding well for seneschals, does it?"

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"But he must have done it!" Greiryn protested. "We all saw him holding the bow! T-the string was still quivering!"

"My spells," Lord Jalanus said icily, "do not lie. Lord Crimmon is innocent."

"I-I quite understand," the seneschal said hastily. "I didn't mean to doubt you! It's just so... so bewildering! Who could have done it, then?"

"Bolyth," the War Wizard snapped, turning to the mountainous Purple Dragon who always lurked at his elbow, "have the gates closed immediately. Post guards. I want this estate sealed. Seneschal, reveal unto me, as soon as your wits allow, who—if anyone—has left this house since the deaths." He rose in a swirl of cloth-of-gold and claret-hued velvet oversleeves, his third change of garments in as many hours.

"I—but of course," Greiryn agreed, almost babbling. "There can't be all that many. We're not like the Dales here, with Elminster flitting in and out like some great nightbat!"

Behind them both, a suit of armor in the corner blurred momentarily. Rhauligan saw it become a white-bearded man in robes, wink at him, and wave cheerily. He winked back, just before the armor became simply armor again.

Oblivious to this visitation, the seneschal was babbling on, clearly shaken at the thought of his young lord master's innocence. Now that was interesting in itself... "Uh, great Lord Justice," Greiryn interrupted himself, "where're you going now?"

"To question the bodies, of course," the War Wizard snapped,

drawing out a wand that was fully three feet long and seemed to be made entirely of polished and fused human fingerbones. "They rarely have much of value to impart, but —'tis procedure..."
"And we are all slaves to procedure," Rhauligan told the ceiling gently, completing the court saying. At the doorway, the striding War Wizard stopped, stiffened, then surged into motion again, sweeping out of the room without a word.
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"I answer to my Lord Eskult," the old man said shortly, "not to you."
Lord Jalanus drew himself up, eyes glittering. His nose quivered with embottled fury and he fairly spat out the words, "Do you know who I am, puling worm?"
The head gardener spat thoughtfully down into the rushes at their feet, shifted his chew to the other cheek, and said contemptuously, "Aye. The sort of miserable excuse for a War Wizard that's all Cormyr can muster from the younglings, these days. You'd not have been allowed across the threshold of the Royal Court in my day. I guarded those doors for the good of the realm—and turned back from them far, far better men than you." He turned on his heel and strode out of the room, leaving the Lord Justice snarling with incoherent rage in his wake.
"Clap that man in chains!" Jalanus Westerbotham howled as soon as he could master words again. Two Purple Dragons started obediently away from their stations along the walls,
only to come to uncertain halts as the stout merchant, moving with apparent laziness, somehow got to the doorway and filled it... with one hand on the hilt of a blade that looked well-used and sturdy, and which hadn't been in evidence before.
"The Lord spoke in empty hyperbole," Rhauligan told the armsmen, "not meaning you to take his words literally. He knows very well that imprisoning a veteran of the Purple Dragons—and a close friend of the King at that, from the

days when Azoun was a boy prince—merely for insisting that he be questioned with due courtesy, would be excessive. When word of such a serious lack of judgment reached the ears of Vangerdahast, even a Scepter of Justice would have to be hasty in his explanations, and no such haste would save him, if the King learned of the matter. After all, what is more valuable to the realm than a loyal, long-serving Purple Dragon? You'd know that better than most, goodmen, eh?"

The two Purple Dragons nodded. One was almost smiling as they turned slowly to look back at their quivering superior.

His hands were white as he gripped the back of the chair he was standing behind and murmured in a voice as hard and cold as a drawn blade, "Goodman Rhauligan is correct. I spoke in hyperbole."

Wordlessly the guards nodded and returned to their places along the walls. The Lord Justice glared down at several sheets of parchment on the table for a moment, his gaze scorching, then snapped, "Bring in the master cellarer. Alone." He lifted his head and favored Rhauligan with a look that promised the merchant a slow, lingering death, sometime soon.

The turret vendor gave him a cheery smile. "It takes a strong, exceptional man to endure the strain of keeping up these truth-reading spells. You do us all proud, Lord Jalanus. I can well see why Vangey named you a Scepter of Justice."

"Oh, be silent," the War Wizard said in disgust. "Have done with this mockery."

"No, I mean what I say!" Rhauligan protested. "Have you not learned all you needed to from yon gardener, even though he thinks he told you nothing? Hard work, that is, and ably done. Vangey missed telling you just one thing: never use the commands 'Clap that man in chains!' or 'Flog that wench!' They don't work, d'you see? That failure goes a resounding double with the younger generation—you know, the one the gardener thinks you're part of!"

Jalanus waved a weary hand in acceptance and dismissal, as

a disturbance at the door heralded the arrival of the master cellarer, a man who had the look of an old and scared rabbit. Four grinning guards towered around him, obviously enjoying the man's shrinking terror, and the War Wizard looked long at them ere turning to gaze at Rhauligan.

Then the Lord Justice cleared his throat and asked in a gentle voice, "Renster, is it not? Please, sit down, and be at ease. No one is accusing you of any wrongdoing..."

The stout merchant leaned back against the wall and nodded in satisfaction. Perhaps War Wizards could learn things after all.

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Rhauligan slipped out of the interviewing chamber as the twelfth guest—the castellan of the vaults, a surly, stout little man—was being ushered in. The merchant could feel the satisfied glare of the Lord Justice between his shoulder blades as he slipped through the doorway, trotted past a suspicious guard, and fell into step beside the War Wizard's eleventh "guest," the clerk of the estate.

The clerk—young and sunken-eyed, his face etched with fear and utter weariness—spared his new escort one glance and muttered, "I suppose the real questions begin now, is that it? After that strutting peacock has worn me down?"

"It's our usual procedure," Rhauligan confided reassuringly, man to man. "We have to give wizards something to do, or they're apt to get up to mischief—creating new monsters, blowing up thrones. That sort of thing. The problem is, there isn't much they're fit to do, so..." As he gestured back down the passage, the clerk smiled thinly and turned away, down a

side hall. Rhauligan hastened to follow. "Where are Lord Eskult's personal papers kept?"

"His will, d'you mean?" the clerk asked dismissively. "The seneschal fetched that even before Lord High-And-Mighty got here. The three visiting lords wanted to 1—"

"Yes, yes," Rhauligan agreed, "but where did he fetch it

from?"
The clerk stopped and gave the turret vendor a curious look. "If it's all that gold you're after," he said, "forget about it. The castellan has it hid down in the vaults, somehow so arcane that to reach it three guards all have to attend him, each carrying some secret part of a key or other."
"It's not the gold," Rhauligan said. "It's the trading agreements, the ledgers, the tax scrolls—all that. Your work."
The clerk gave him a hard stare, then shrugged. "Too dry for most to care about, but as you seem to be one of those touched-wits exceptions, they're all in an office just along here."
"You have a key, of course. Who else does?"
"Why, the Lord—or did; 'twas around his neck when I saw him laid out. Then, look, so does the head maid, the seneschal of course, the back chambermaid—'twas hers to clean, y'see—and the Crown has a key that the tax scrutineers use when they come."
"I," Rhauligan told him, "am a tax scrutineer. Here, I carry a royal writ; examine it, pray." Reaching into his shirtfront he drew forth a rather crumpled parchment, from which a heavy royal seal dangled. The clerk rolled his eyes and waved it away—even before the three platinum pieces folded into it slid out, falling straight into the man's palm.
"I've come to Taverton Hall," Rhauligan said smoothly as the man juggled the coins in astonishment, "without that key. I need to see those papers—now—in utmost secrecy." The clerk came to a stop in the corridor and squinted at the merchant, almost seeming excited.
"That meaning if I tell no one I let you in here, you'll say the same?" he asked, peering up and down the passage as if he expected masked men with swirling cloaks and daggers to bound out of every door and corner in an instant.
"Precisely," Rhauligan murmured. No masked men appeared. Satisfied, the clerk flashed a smile, shook a ring of keys out of his sleeve, and unlocked the nearest door with only the

faintest of rattles. Then he was off down the corridor, strolling along in an apparent half-doze as if strange merchants and unlocking doors were far from his mind.

Rhauligan eased the door wide, held up a coin, and muttered a word over it. A soft glow was born along its edges, brightening into a little blue-white beam, like errant moonlight. The merchant turned the coin to light up the tiny office beyond, seeking traps.

After a long scrutiny, Rhauligan was satisfied no lurking slayer or death-trap awaited him. There was, however, a full oil-lamp, a striker, and a bolt on the inside of the door. Perfect.

The door closed behind the merchant, its bolt sliding solidly into place, a few breaths before the tramp of heavy boots in the corridor heralded the approach of a half-dozen guards, sent to find and bring back "that dangerous Harper." They thundered right past the closed, featureless door.

Rhauligan peered and thumbed scrolls and ledgers, and flipped pages. It wasn't long before something became obvious through all the scrawled signatures and expense entries and reassignments of funds: the Paertrover coffers were well-nigh empty. He sat back thoughtfully, stroking his chin, and only gradually became aware that the room behind him seemed brighter than before.

He turned with smooth swiftness, hand going to the hilt of the throwing knife strapped to his left forearm, but nothing met his eye save a fading, swirling area of radiance, like a scattering of misplaced moonlight. He blinked once, and it was gone. Gone—but had definitely been there.

After a brief tour of that end of the room, poking and tapping in search of secret doors and passages, Rhauligan shrugged and began the quick process of returning the room to exactly how he'd found it. When he was done, he blew out the lamp and slipped out the door again.

Alone in the darkness, the radiance silently returned,

and with it what Rhauligan had been too slow to turn and

see: a disembodied head, its face pinched and white, and the plumes of the long helm it wore dancing gently in an unseen breeze. It was smiling broadly as it looked at the closed door, and abruptly started to fade away. A breath later, the room was dark and empty once more.

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Guards hunted Glarasteer Rhauligan around Taverton Hall for a good two bells, shouting and clumping up stairs and down passages, but found no sign of the merchant. Their failure came as no surprise to their quarry, who spent the afternoon in happy slumber deep in the shade of an overhang high up on the roof. If Rhauligan was right, things would happen at the Hall soon, in the dark hours, and he'd have to be awake, aware, and in the right spot. Unless, of course, he wanted to see more murders done.

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Guards are notoriously lazy and unobservant after a heavy meal and a bottle of fine vintage each (contributed by the seneschal with a rather morose shrug and the words, "You may as well. My master, who gathered these, is a little too dead to miss them now.") And it was at that time, with sunset looming, that a certain much-sought-after dealer in fine turrets slid down a pillar and sprang away into the trees. He left in his wake only dancing, disturbed bushes for a bored guard to glance at, peer hard, shrug, and return his attention to a hard-plied toothpick.

Rhauligan circled the Hall like a silent shadow, keeping among the trees and shrubbery as he sought other sentinels. Armsmen guarded the gates and the grand front entrance of the Hall, but none stood like ridiculous statues in gardens or wooded glades, to feed the biting bugs.

Not far from the closed and little-used cart gate around the back of the Hall, however, something was stamping on the moss: a saddled horse, hampered in its cropping of grass by four heavy saddlebags. Rhauligan checked their contents and its tether, smiled grimly, and noted that the horse was

just out of sight of the Hall windows. A little path wandered off from where he stood toward the back doors. The merchant looked up, found a bough that was big enough, and swung himself aloft to wait.

It did not take long. The last golden light soon faded and the crickets began their songs. Nightgloom stole through the trees, dew glistened as servants lit lamps, and the dark shadow on the branch shifted his position with infinite care to keep his feet from going numb.

The first sharp whiff of smoke came a breath before a long tongue of flame flared up, like a catching candle, inside a nearby window. There followed a sudden, rising roar, then a dull gasp as flames were born around something very flammable; draperies or clothes well-soaked in lamp oil, no doubt. Then came the shouts, the shattering of glass, and men pounding here and there in the sudden, hot brightness with buckets, valuables, and much cursing. The shadow never moved from its perch. All was unfolding as foreseen: Taverton Hall was afire.

The roaring became a steady din, and sparks spat forth into the night in a glittering rain. Draperies at one window erupted in a flame so bright that Rhauligan could clearly see the faces of the hurrying, jostling men. Lord Jalanus was among them, bent over an open book that an anxious-looking guard was holding open and up to him.

There was a crash and fresh flames as part of the roof fell in, and flaming embers rained down around the War Wizard. Jalanus staggered back, snarling something. Then he snatched at a spark in the air, caught it, stammered something hasty—and all over the Hall the flames seemed to freeze for a moment, falling silent and turning green.

A breath later, they started to move again, crawling toward the stars with lessened hunger. The War Wizard shook his head, slammed the book shut, and sent the armsman to join the bucket-runners. Then he raised his hands as if about to conduct a choir, and cast quite a different spell.

Several rooms suddenly vanished, fire and all, leaving a gaping hole in the darkness. The flames that remained were in two places, lesser remnants small enough that stable-buckets of hurled water might tame them. Every hand would be needed, however, and the night would be a long and sweat-soaked struggle. The shadow on the branch stirred, but did not move. It was waiting for something else.

The War Wizard opened his book again and strode to where a lamp afforded better light. That was what someone had been waiting for... someone who slipped out of a window not far from the flames, crossing the ember-strewn lawn to the trees in a few darting strides.

The tether was undone and hand-coiled, then saddle-leather creaked just beneath Rhauligan, who flexed his fingers, waited a moment more, then made his move.

The saddle had a high crupper. He lowered himself gently down onto it with one hand, steadying himself against the branch with the other. The faint whisper of his movements was cloaked by the roar of the fire and the sounds made by the unwitting man in front of him, leaning forward to shake out the reins. Rhauligan delicately plucked a dagger from its sheath on the back of the man's belt and threw it away into the night.

That slight sound made the man turn in his saddle and reach for his sword. Rhauligan turned with him, placing one firm hand on the man's sword wrist and snaking the other around his throat. "Warm evening we're having," he murmured politely, as the man in front of him stiffened.

His next few breaths were spent in frantic twisting and straining as the two men struggled together. Rhauligan hooked his boots around those of his foe to keep from being shoved off the snorting, bucking horse, and the night became a confusion of elbows, sudden jerks, and grunts of effort. The merchant kept the man's throat in the vise of his tightening elbow, and frantic fingers clawed at his arm once they found the dagger sheath empty—clawed, but found no

freedom.
The man kicked and snarled, and abruptly the horse burst into motion, crashing through rose bushes with a fearful, sobbing cry of its own. Trees plunged up to meet them in the night, with an open garden beyond. Rhauligan grimly
set about kicking at one flank of the mount, to turn it back toward the flames.
He was failing, and taking some vicious bites from the man in the saddle in front of him, when firelight gleamed on a helm as a guard rose suddenly into view almost under the hooves of the galloping horse. It reared, bugling in real fear, and when it came down, running hard, the blazing wing of the Hall was suddenly dead ahead, and approaching fast.
The man in the saddle twisted and ducked frantically, almost hauling Rhauligan off into thin air, but the merchant clung to him with fingers of iron as they burst through a closed gate, wood flying in splinters around their ears, plunged down a lane, and charged into a knot of men dipping buckets in a garden pond.
Someone screamed, and for a moment there was something yielding beneath the mount's pounding hooves. Rhauligan had a brief glimpse of the War Wizard standing calmly in their path, casting another firequench spell at the Hall with careful concentration.
The horse veered to avoid this unmoving obstacle, slipped in ferns and loose earth, and caught its hooves on a low stone wall. Bone shattered with a sharp crack. Their mount screamed like a child in agony, kicked wildly at the sky, and fell over on its side, twisting and arching. It landed on a row of stone flower urns that shattered into dagger-like shards and ended its keening abruptly.
An instant later, a flying Rhauligan fetched up hard against an unbroken urn. Its shattering made his shoulder erupt in searing pain.
As he rolled unsteadily to his feet, gasping, he saw drawn swords on all sides, the furious face of Lord Jalanus glaring

down—then a sudden, blindingly-bright white light as the War Wizard unhooded a wand.
"You set this fire, thief!"
The shout was close at hand. Rhauligan flung himself forward into a frantic roll away from it without looking back to see how close the blade seeking his blood was.
Sharp steel whistled through empty air, very close by. Rhauligan came to his feet, sprang onto the ornamental wall, and spun around to face his foe. The man who'd been in the saddle lurched toward him, hacking at the air like a madman.
"You set this fire!" Immult Greiryn shouted again, missing Rhauligan with a tremendous slash so forceful that it almost made the seneschal fall over. "Slay him, one of you! Cut him down!"
"No," said the Lord Justice in a cold, crisp voice that seemed to still the sound of the fire itself and made men freeze all around. "Do no such thing. This man lies. The merchant is innocent."
Wild-eyed, the seneschal whirled and charged at the War Wizard, his blade flashing up. Jalanus Westerbotham stepped back in alarm, opening his mouth to call for aid, but bright steel flashed out of the night, spinning end over end in a hungry blur that struck blood from Greiryn's sword hand, rang off the seneschal's blade like a hammer striking a gong, and was gone into the flowers in a trice.
Lord Jalanus muttered something and lunged forward with sudden, supple speed, thrusting his empty hand at Greiryn as if it were a blade. The blow he landed seemed little more than a shove, but the seneschal staggered, doubled up as if a sword had pierced him through the guts, and crumpled onto his side, unconscious.
The War Wizard bent over the man to be sure he was asleep. Satisfied, he looked up and snapped, "Bolyth! The wire—this man's thumbs, little fingers, and big toes bound together. Then stop his bleeding and watch over him yourself."

As his everpresent, most trusted guard lumbered obediently forward, Jalanus Westerbotham turned his head, found Rhauligan, and said shortly, "A good throw. My thanks."
The merchant sketched him a florid bow. The lips of the Lord Justice twisted into a rueful smile.
Guards were crowding in around them all, now, pushing past the servants and noble guests. "Lord," one of them asked hesitantly, waving a gauntleted hand at Rhauligan, "shouldn't we be arresting this one too?"
The War Wizard raised one cold eyebrow. "When,
Brussgurt, did you adopt the habit of deciding for me who is guilty and who innocent? I've had a watching spell on this man for most of the evening: He's most certainly innocent of the charge of fire-setting. I suspect his only crime was learning too much ... for the seneschal to want him to go on living."
"So who slew my daughter?" a darkly furious voice demanded. Its owner came shouldering through the last rushing smokes of the dying fire with the other two noble lords and their white-faced, staring daughters in tow. Lord Hornsar Farrowbrace's eyes were like two chips of bright steel, and his hand was on the hilt of a heavy warsword that had not been on his hip before.
"Master Rhauligan?" the War Wizard asked. "You tell him."
The merchant met the eyes of the Scepter of Justice for a long, sober moment, nodded, then turned to the angry noble.
"The seneschal," he said simply, pointing down at the helpless, waking man who was being securely bound with wire, under the knees of three burly guards.
"The Paertrover gold is almost all gone and Greiryn was the only longtime family servant with access to it. Lord, I fear your daughter lies dead this night solely because Greiryn's a poor shot. He'd accounted for the coins flowing out with bills and ledger-entries that only one man could be certain were false: his lord and master. He meant to slay Lord Eskult while

Shamril's attentions kept him standing more or less in one place: a clear target that an old veteran missed."

Lord Farrowbrace growled wordlessly as he looked down at Immult Greiryn, who cowered away despite the burly guards between them.

"But what of the ghost?" Lady Lathdue Huntingdown protested. "It's not just some tall tale from Crimmon! The servants have all been saying..

Rhauligan held up a hand to stop her speaking, went to where the horse lay, and tore open the laces of a saddlebag.

Gold coins glittered in the hand he held out to her. "The last of Lord Eskult's wealth," he explained. "This wretch at our feet has already spent or stolen the rest. He had help from at least one man, the castellan of the vault—whose bones are no doubt yonder in the heart of the blaze, wearing the seneschal's armor or chain of office or something to make us think the flames have claimed poor, faithful old Greiryn."

Coins clinked as he tossed a second saddlebag down beside the first, then a third. The last yielded up a plumed helm and ajar of white powder.

"The grinning ghost of Taverton Hall," Rhauligan announced to the gathered, peering folk, holding them up. "You were all supposed to flee, you see, not rush to see who'd fired the bolt..."

Someone screamed. Someone else cursed, slowly and in trembling tones. Folk were backing away, their faces pale and their fearful stares directed past Rhauligan's shoulder.

The turret merchant turned slowly, already knowing what he'd see. He swallowed, just once, when he found that he'd been dead right.

A breeze he did not feel was stirring the plumes of the helm worn by the grinning face of the head that was floating almost nose to nose with him. Lord Farrowbrace started calling hoarsely on god after god, somewhere nearby, and Rhauligan could hear the sounds of boots whose owners

were enthusiastically running away.
The dark eyes of the Grinning Ghost of Taverton Hall were like endless, lightless pits, but somehow they were meeting his own gaze with an approving look, so Rhauligan stood his ground when ghostly shadows spilled out from the helm, flickered bone-white, and seemed to struggle and convulse. After long moments, some of those shifting shadows became a ghostly hand, reaching out for the Harper.
Scalp crawling, Glarasteer Rhauligan did the bravest, and possibly the most foolhardy thing in his life: He stood his ground as that spectral arm clapped his own arm firmly.
The cold was instant and bone-chilling. Rhauligan grunted and staggered back involuntarily, his face going gray. There was a loud, solid thump beside him, and when he looked down, he discovered Lord Justice Jalanus Westerbotham sprawled on his back in the mud, fallen in a dead faint.
Trembling just a trifle, Rhauligan looked back at the ghost—but it was gone. Empty air swirled and flickered in front of him; he was standing alone in the moonlight.
The Lady Lathdue and the Lady Chalass were approaching him hesitantly, their eyes dark and apprehensive, the blades borne by their fathers thrusting out protectively between their slim arms. Lord Farrowbrace, his eyes haunted with wonder, stood a little apart, his own sword dangling toward the trampled ground.
"Sir? Are you well?" the Lady Lathdue asked.
As she spoke, a throng of ghostly figures in finery and armor seemed to melt into solidity all around the nobles, all of them nodding approvingly or sketching salutes with spectral hands or blades. Rhauligan blinked, staggering under the sheer weight of so much ghostly regard—and when he could see again, they were all gone.
Wondering, the turret merchant looked down at his arm, which still felt encased in bone-searing ice. His leather jerkin had melted away in three deep gouges, where three bone-white marks were burned into his bronzed skin. Like old

scars they seemed: the parallel stripes of three gripping fingers.
Glarasteer Rhauligan looked up at them all, drew in a deep breath, and said in a voice that was almost steady, "I'll live. Smoke can kill those who can't move out of it: we must find and free Lord Crimmon Paertrover. Let us be about it."
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But from that night until the day he died, those three white marks never left Rhauligan's arm.
Introduction
THE PLACE WHERE GUARDS SNORE AT THEIR POSTS
We've seen young lasses who wield magic struggling to come of age in some of the earlier tales collected here, but never let it be said that Ed of the Greenwood isn't an equal opportunity Realmsfather. Here we have a story of a young lad who can (more or less) use magic trying to find himself—or more precisely, impress the lass he's hopelessly smitten by.
The setting is the large Sword Coast isle ofMintarn. All of the cast are appearing for the first time in Realms fiction, and the unfolding events begin on the ninth day ofKythorn in the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR).
Volo—of course—knows just what to say about a young man struggling to master magic and win a reputation: "Ah, another grand would-be archmage, well on his way to ruling the Realms entire. So long as he doesn't stumble over the huddled carcasses of all the others who've gone striding forth on the same road before him—and fallen flat on their long, inquisitive noses. Insulting? Nay, for I am of their number, and my backside daily feels the tread of eager, overconfident idiots certain they can do better than I did. Fools. The
great tragedy of it all is that rather than hurling about fumble-fingered and fuddle-headed spells, most of them could perform far more useful functions in the lands and win themselves more respectable and solid reputations, to boot

—say, by becoming executioners, or palace torturers, or mass poisoners..."

THE PLACE WHERE GUARDS SNORE AT THEIR POSTS

Xheir jaws were clamped shut, forefin muscles pulsing in the tightening that signified irritation or disapproval. The orders and judgment of Iakhovas evidently weren't good enough for sahuagin. Bloody-minded idiots.

Sardinakh uncoiled his tentacles from the halberds and harpoons he'd been oh-so-absently caressing since their arrival and settled himself a little closer to the map on the chartroom table. He did this slowly, to show the fish-heads just how little he feared them, and tapped the lord's seal on the dryland map of Mintarn—the seal of the sahuagin lord Rrakulnar—to remind them that their superiors, at least, respected the authority of a "mere squid."

"The orders I was personally given by Iakhovas," he said gently, driving the point home a little deeper,

"were to blockade Mintarn, allowing nothing into, or more importantly, out of, its harbors. Taking the island would be a bold stroke—and I frankly find it an attractive one—but it cannot be our main concern. Before all else, we must prevent ships from leaving Mintarn to go to the aid of Waterdeep, Baldur's Gate, and the other coastal cities."

"And that isss bessst done," the larger and burlier of the sahuagin hissed, affecting the invented accent of Crowndeep, the fabled—and perhaps mythical—cradle-city of Sword Coast sahuagin, "by capturing the entire isle." He spoke as if explaining bald facts to a simple child, not his commanding officer.

Fleetingly, but not for the first time, Sardinakh wondered if Iakhovas derived some dark and private amusement from putting seafolk who hated each other together, one commanding the other. Perhaps it was merely to make treachery unlikely, but it certainly made for some sharp-toothed moments.

The tako slid a lazily dismissive tentacle across the map to

let the fish-heads know he was no more frightened now than when they'd begun drifting forward from the other side of the table to loom close in beside him, fingering their spears and daggers, and told them, "We'll discuss this at greater length as the brightwater unfolds. I see that Mlavverlath approaches."

The sunken ship that served Sardinakh as a headquarters lay canted at an angle on a reef that had grown over it, claimed it, and now held what was left of it together. Those remains did not include most of the landward side of the hull, which left the hulk open to the scouring currents, and provided a panoramic view of the gulf of dappled blue water across which Mlavverlath was swimming.

Mlav was impetuous and ambitious, more like the sahuagin than his own kind, and so ran straight into the jaws of his own reckless impatience far too often. Yet unlike the fish-heads menacingly crowding Sardinakh's office, his hide still wore the dappling of raw youth. Their overly bold ways were long years set, and a problem he was going to have to contend with.

Sharkblood, he was contending with it now! Like all tako, Sardinakh could dwell ashore or beneath the waves, though he preferred warmer waters than these. He knew Mintarn's worth. To drylanders, it was an island strategic to Sword Coast shipping, offering an excellent natural harbor and independence from shore realm laws, feuds, and taxes. Sardinakh also knew he hated these two sahuagin officers even more than he hated all fish-heads, and must contrive to get them killed before they did as much for him. Unfortunately, they commanded a strong and able fighting force of their own kind that outnumbered those at Downfoam six to one, or more. His moment must be chosen with extreme care.

Thankfully, "extreme care" was something most tako could take, and no sahuagin really understood. If only Mlav could be taught to use some measure of it, before it was too—

"Perhapsss we could now deliver our important reportsss," the sahuagin Narardiir said in a tone that made it clear he was neither requesting nor waiting for permission to do so.
Sardinakh carefully did not glance at Mlavverlath's approaching form as he said in a cool, almost flippant tone, "Why don't you?"
Both sahuagin hissed to show their displeasure, but when he neither looked at them or made any reaction, they were forced to move on. Their black eyes were staring, always staring. Ineffectual gogglers. He turned his back on them to show fish-heads held no fear for this wrinkled and wortsome old tako.
"There is newsss both good and bad from our ssspiesss assshore," Narardiir began stiffly. "The dragon Hoondarrh, called 'the Red Rage of Mintarn,' has not long ago begun a Long Sssleep in his cave. Ssshould we invade, he won't intervene."
"The good news," Sardinakh agreed calmly, his eyes now on Mlawerlath as the tako passed over the outermost sentries, regarded but unchallenged. "And the bad?"
The other sahuagin spoke this time, and, by the mercy of whatever god governed sea refuse, did so plainly. "Recent dryland pirate smuggling and slaving has driven the human Tarnheel Embuirhan, who styles himself the Tyrant of
Mintarn and is the dryland ruler of the isle, to hire a com-' pahy of mercenaries to serve Mintarn as a harbor garrison. A human force, and highly trained, by name the 'Black Buckler Band.' It is thought, and we concur, that they won't hesitate to wake the dragon if beset by foes who seem on the verge of victory."
"There isss little elssse to report," Narardiir added, "but—"
"That is a good thing," Sardinakh interrupted smoothly, "because Mlavverlath is here."
As he spoke, the younger tako flung out his tentacles in all directions, to serve as a brake to his powerful journeying, and slid into Sardinakh's office with his tentacles rippling,

water swirling around them, and grace hurled to the winds.
Befitting an underling in disgrace, Mlavverlath passed between the hissing sahuagin and Sardinakh's desk and struck the far wall of the chamber with a solid thump. The old but coral-buttressed bulkhead scarcely quivered.
"Hail Sardinakh, master of all our voyages," Mlavverlath said hastily, venting many bubbles in his haste and nervousness. "This one salutes you and at the same time humbly beseeches your pardon at his lateness. This one has devised a cunning plan, as promised, and has come to unfold it before you."
He glanced at the two sahuagin and blushed a little in his nervousness. That purpling promptly deepened when the fish-heads hissed mockingly, "Cunning plan, cunning plan," and leaned forward to hear with exaggerated scullings of their webbed claws.
"My officers are somewhat excited," Sardinakh explained in dry tones, ignoring fish-head glares. "Ignore them, and speak freely. Keep me not waiting."
Mlavverlath jetted forth bubbles in a sigh, slid some tentacles around the nearest mast-pillar more for the reassurance an anchor-point brought than for anything else, and said, "This one's plan should eliminate both the merfolk who dwell in the harbor and the new dryland garrison of human mercenaries."
The sahuagin hissed loudly at the thought that their news was obviously old tidings elsewhere in Downfoam, and .Sardinakh took care that the beak-fluttering that signified tako mirth was well hidden from his underling. Mlawerlath's tone of speech would have better matched the announcement: "This one has devised a plan that this one hopes will win him back a place in good favor with Sardinakh."
"Please excuse this one's plain recitation of simple facts," Mlawerlath began haltingly. "It is intended as no insult, but to anchor the scheme. Thus, then. For some years, the mer-

folk of Mintarn have praised and hungrily devoured oysters brought from the Shining Sea nigh eastern Calimshan and the Border Kingdoms, where the waters are warmed by the outflow of the Lake of Steam. Suldolphans—the humans of the city whose dwellers harvest most of the oysters—like these oysters, which have somehow acquired the name 'Mabadann,' done in lemon. So, too, do the folk of Mintarn."

The two sahuagin showed their fangs in unison then, in great yawns designed to display their boredom. Sardinakh ignored them, but Mlawerlath, obviously flustered, continued his speech in stammering haste. "I-in the friendship feasts th-they hosted to welcome the new garrison, whom after all they must trust and work with, the merfolk fed the human warriors these oysters."

In his quickening enthusiasm, the young tako forsook his anchor to flail the canted deck with his tentacles as he moved restlessly across the room, then back again. "The humans so dote on these oysters now that the water-filled barrels of live Mabadann oysters are the most eagerly awaited shipments into Mintarn. The drylanders have even taken to sneaking some shipments past the merfolk to get more for themselves."

The sahuagin were drifting a little closer now, their heads turning to hear better; a sure sign of interest. Mlav-verlath warmed to his telling. "Now, in coastal caves nigh Suldolphor dwells a malenti, Jilurgala Rluroon by name, who owes this one a debt. Long ago she perfected a magic that puts creatures into stasis—unbreathing, unseeing, as if dead—for short times, with set trigger conditions."

The tako's tentacles were almost dancing with excitement now. "If she can be induced to cast her spell on a hundred or 'aimed bullywugs," Mlavverlath added, his voice rising, "of those who dwell near at hand, on the Border Kingdoms coast, south of Yallasch—and Jilurgala sets its trigger to awaken them when their barrel is opened, they can be the next shipment of oysters smuggled past the merfolk and

into the drylander kitchens of Mintarn!"
It is rare for a tako's mirth to be loud, but Sardinakh's quivering and loud venting of raging bubbles was uproarious laughter. It drowned out the amused hooting of the sahuagin and left the commander of Downfoam barely able to signal his approval to his flushed and quivering underling.
"To it, 0 Master of Oysters!" Sardinakh roared, tearing apart a waterlogged bench with a surge of his tentacles. "Go, and come back victorious!"
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"Truly," Brandor muttered, as two of the tallest, most muscular Black Buckler warriors minced out of his way, twirling their hands in mockeries of spellcasting and crying out as if in mortal fear as they rolled their eyes and grinned at him, "this is The Place Where Guards Snore At Their Posts."
Ignoring their shouts of laughter and the inevitable bruisings of hilt-first daggers bouncing off his slender shoulders—insulting reminders that as a Black Buckler himself, he must be ready to do battle with his fingers and dagger, should his spells prove too pitiful—the apprentice pounded down the slippery steps that led to the kitchens... and his current punishment.
Brandor was forever collecting punishments. Since the arrival of the Bucklers on seawind-swept Mintarn, his daily acquisitions of reprimands and duty tasks had reached a truly impressive rate, even for the youngest weakling ever to wear the Black Buckler badge.
It did not help that he was the sole apprentice of the accomplished but aging Druskin, supreme sorcerer of the Black Buckler Band. That made the other two Band mages see "the little grinning fool Brandor" as a future rival, to be ridiculed
and discredited at every opportunity. Most of the strapping Buckler warriors, he knew, saw him as a pitiful excuse for a

man, to be made sport of until he fled into the sea and rid them of his face and his pranks.

Ah, yes; his pranks. His only source of fun, and his only weapons. Long ago he'd fallen into the habit of responding to bullying with his quick wits and nimble fingers. Those who pestered Brandor the Fool paid the price, be they ever so mighty—and their colleagues roared with laughter.

Mintarn was small and mostly bleak, its folk suspicious of armed outsiders and guarded in their deeds, slow to welcome curious wanderers, and slower still to welcome one who wore both the Black Buckler badge and the robes of a wizard. Boredom had led Brandor to dub the island "The Place Where Guards Snore At Their Posts," and that arch observation had earned him no love among the Tyrant of Mintarn's own warriors.

It had done so just as Brandor's boredom was chased away forever by the sight of dark-eyed, darker-browed Shalara, her hair the hue of the sun as it kissed her slender shoulders and vanished down her beautiful back. He began to hurry down the steps at the thought of her. She often stopped to talk with Halger; she might be down there right now.

The Tyrant's daughter slipped around Mintarn's ramparts and windswept stairs like a shy shadow, free to wander at will. Folk said she was the image of her dead mother, who'd never had any use for brawn and bluster, but had admired a keen mind. Hence her voyage from far Suldolphor to the meager splendors of this lonely isle, despite the coughing chills that had finally claimed her.

The Tyrant was said to dote on Shalara, but Brandor was utterly smitten with her. He would wait on bone-chilling ramparts for hours just to catch a glimpse of her, and Halger had finally forbidden him the kitchens—save when he was working therein for punishment—after he'd lurked and loitered for the better part of a tenday, staring intently at Shalara whenever she poked her head in.

She'd obviously been reluctant to enter and speak freely

with him swallowing and staring at her, and Halger had said spoYet he'd have done anything—anything, even endured a public beating from the fists of the hairiest, most sneering of the brutish Buckler warriors, or foresworn his paltry magic—to have earned her smile and friendship.

Instead, he'd fallen back on the only way he had to get noticed. Pranks.

Brandor the Fool had staged a series of increasingly spectacular pranks to impress Shalara Embuirhan. He'd begun with stealthily hook-spiking guards' boots to the flagstones as they dozed at their posts, just to prove the fitness of the catch-phrase he'd coined, then he switched around all the garrison stores orders.

That had been followed by the switching of officers' undergarments, then the swapping of those same smallclothes with those of the haughtiest ladies of the Tyrant's castle. Then all of the shields hung on the castle walls had mysteriously begun changing places, and the castle chamberlain's usual feast welcoming speech had been hilariously rewritten, just on the night when the chamberlain had taken ill and the understeward had been called upon to read out the speech in his place, with the stern admonition to "change not a word."

Not a night later, the moaning ghost of Mintarn had been heard again, just outside the windows of the shuttered house near the docks where the Buckler warriors were wont to take their coins and their restlessness to the doors where plump and smiling lasses beckoned. Then someone had let out a paddock-full of mules to clotter and kick around the docks, and—

The inevitable results had come down upon Brandor's head. He'd seen kitchen duty and more kitchen duty, washing mountains of dishes, pickling jars upon jars of fish, and staggering down the long, spray-slippery path out of the castle to dump slimy basket after slimy basket of kitchen-scraps into the breeding pools where the tiny silverfin boiled

up like fists reaching out of the water, their miniature jaws agape, to greet his every visit.

All of these panting, sweaty tasks had been done under the watchful eye of the old cook of Castle Mintarn, and

Halger was not a man to miss noticing or tolerate a single moment of prank-preparation or malingering. A fat-bellfed, greasy ex-pirate whose left arm ended in a stump (which he usually fitted with a blackened, battered cooking pot), Halger stumped and huffed around the lofty, smoke-filled hall that was his domain. Somehow he contrived to keep no less than three cooking hearths alight and a steady stream of food going forth on dome-covered platters to feed the folk of the Castle, the Tyrant's guards, the Bucklers, and whomever was in port and at the Tyrant's guest table.

Down the years, Halger had also found the time to be Shalara's confidante, trusted confessor, and wise old guide to the wider world. He knew her secret thoughts and yearnings and her judgments of the world around her and the people in it—and the amused look in his eyes when they fell upon a mutely staring Brandor made the apprentice squirm and sometimes want to shriek in sheer frustration.

As he ducked through the dogleg of archways designed to keep gusting storm winds from blowing out the kitchen hearths, Druskin's apprentice let out a sigh of relief. Someone had piled too much wood on the blaze in the corner hearth. The smoke and sparks were roaring up the tallest chimney, the one that soared up through the thick walls of the beacon tower for a long bowshot, into the skies. Halger was shouting and red-faced men were running hither and yon with fire-tongs and soot-blackened aprons, while the women bent grimly over their pots and waited for the tumult to blow over. The lofty, many-balconied kitchen was ruled by swirling smoke and chaos.

There among it all was his waiting pile of potatoes, blessedly bereft of the old pirate cook standing with arms folded across his mighty chest and a soft but razor-edged query as

to the tardiness of a certain apprentice. Thankfully Brandor snatched up the peeling knife Halger had left waiting on the stool, eyed the waiting bucket of similar knives that he was supposed to turn to whenever the knife he was using grew dull—and realized he was doomed.

The corner hearth had held leek-and-potato soup, almost certainly scorched down the insides of its cauldrons and ruined. Halger was going to be striding over here all too soon, in his flopping sea boots, expecting to find thrice his own weight in fresh-peeled potatoes waiting. If a certain diligent apprentice worked in frantic, finger-cutting haste, he might—might—have six potatoes ready by then.

Brandor swallowed, sat down on the stool, and closed his eyes. If he changed the incantation of the dancing dagger spell just so, it should serve to cause the blade to cut in a curve. Add four... no, six would be better... such phrases to the casting chant, and the cuts should come around the surface of a single roughly spheroid object. Treble the crushed mosquitoes and the iron filings, and add the trebling phrase to the summation, and he should have four knives whirling in their own dance, peeling his potatoes for him. All he need do is stand back—with stool and bucket—out of harm's way, and watch for idiots blundering into the field of flight. A simple snap of his fingers would still cause the knives to fall to the floor in an instant... by Azuth, it couldn't fail!

Casting a quick look around at the subsiding chaos to make sure Halger wasn't watching, Brandor drew in a deep breath, then performed the spell in mumbling haste. He almost lost a finger when the knife in his hand tugged its way free to plunge into the waiting mound of potatoes, but it worked. By Mystra, it worked!

He was drawing breath for a satisfied laugh when he saw • that the knives were whirling ever faster, and the brown wet shavings they'd been strewing in all directions were now pale white. The air was full of wet slivers of potato! The—oh,

gods!
He snapped his fingers, but the cloud of carving before him only whirled faster. Desperately he stammered the chant backward—and with a gasp of relief that was almost a sob, Brandor saw the knives plummet to the floor. Their landings made no clatter, because that floor was now knee-deep in fresh, wet potato hash.
Staring at this latest disaster, Brandor suddenly became aware that he was drenched—covered in slivers of cold, wet potato that were slowly slithering down his face, off the ends of his fingers, and past his ears—and that a vast and sudden silence had fallen in the kitchen.
He hardly dared lift his eyes to meet Halger's gaze, but there was no ducking away now. Shaking diced potato from his hands, Brandor reluctantly raised his head.
And found himself looking into the eyes of Shalara Embuirhan—eyes in which mirth was swiftly sliding into disgust.
"Uh, well met, Shalara," he mumbled, hope leaping within him when there should have been no hope. Gods, but his humiliation was complete.
"When are you ever going to grow up and stop wasting your wits?" those sweet lips said cuttingly, anger making them thin. "Pranks are for children—grown men foolish enough to play pranks end up very swiftly dead!"
No, he'd been wrong a moment ago: now his humiliation was complete.
She stood staring at him with contempt for what seemed like an eternity before whirling away in a confusion of fine gown and long, flared sleeves, storming back out of the kitchen.
Brandor hadn't managed to do anything more than blush as red as a boiled lobster and nod grimly at her words. He was still standing crestfallen, covered in wet slivers of potato, when the entire kitchen heard the dull boom of the door to the beacon tower stairs slamming. A crash that could only have been made by a young lady in the grip of anger.

Brandor looked down at his hands and discovered they were shaking. A pair of all too familiar battered sea boots came into view as they stopped in front of him. He raised his eyes with no greater enthusiasm, this time.

Halger was standing with his hairy arms folded across his chest and a twinkle in his eye. Of course. He met the miserable gaze of the apprentice, chuckled, then grunted, "Want to impress the ladies, do we? Peel yon mountain before we finish, and I'm sure she'll be impressed."

A familiar knife flashed out of his fist, spinning down to an easy catch. Brandor fielded it grimly, looked glumly at the mound of untouched potatoes beyond the slippery heap of hash, and made his slippery way across it, to set to work peeling—the old way.

"I've nothing of import to pass on to you, goodsirs," the Tyrant of Mintarn said quietly. "You know as well as I that no ships have called here, or even been sighted from atop the beacons, these six days past. It's as if the seas have swallowed every last ship, and given us—silence."

They reached for their goblets in grim unison: the white-bearded ruler of Mintarn; the robed, white-haired sorcerer Druskin; and the handsome, saturnine leader of the Black Bucklers, Oldivar Maerlin, who looked every inch an alert, dangerous battle commander.

It was Maerlin who lifted his eyebrow then, in a clear signal to the mage. Druskin cleared his throat, sipped his wine, and cleared it again before saying, "Spells give us some feeble means of piercing such silences, lord. Last night I worked an experimental magic, seeking to touch the mind of a night-flying seabird, and see through its eyes. The experiment was largely a failure. My probing confused the birds and they tended to tumble out of the air and strike the waves. But it did allow me to snatch a temporary seat, undetected, in the aft cabin of a caravel running swiftly north out of Amn, bound for Neverwinter or, failing that, a safe harbor anywhere."

The Tyrant raised his head to fix the wizard with a hard stare. Those last words were clear talk of war.
"A seat at a table where sailors were discussing—?" he prompted. His voice was as quiet as before, and yet the room seemed suddenly as tense as the waiting moments before foes who are glaring at each other charge forward, and a fray begins.
"Dark tidings, but heard secondhand," Druskin replied. "There was an attack on the harbor at Waterdeep—an attack in force, by all manner of marine creatures. Ships were sunk, crews slaughtered fighting to defend their own decks; that sort of thing. Something similar befell at Baldur's Gate—the sailors spoke of ships putting out from there being 'sunk by the score,' in some cases being 'dragged down from below'—and one of them had heard talk of merfolk communities along
the coast being overwhelmed by sahuagin, with bodies drifting in the depths so thick that engorged sharks were dying of sheer weariness, sinking to rest on the bottom."
The wizard regarded the empty bottom of his goblet in mild surprise and added, "How much of this is fancy remains to be seen, but it seems clear that forces from beneath the waves have struck at ships and settlements ashore up and down the Sword Coast and perhaps elsewhere, too, as if all that live in the sea have risen up at once to slaughter those who breathe air and dwell up in the dry realms."
A little silence fell after those words as the three men traded glances. The Tyrant looked longest at Maerlin, who stirred and said grimly, "My duty to you and your people, lord, is to see to the best defense of Mintarn. We can no longer trust in the merfolk, it seems. Simple prudence demands we shift our garrison duties so as to keep watch for forces from the depths coming ashore unseen elsewhere in Mintarn, and attacking us here from unforeseen places and ways."
The Tyrant nodded. "So much I was thinking. Watches, ready arms, and guarded foodstores and water I know well .. .what

of magic?"
The ruler and the commander both looked at Druskin, who smiled faintly and replied, "Warning spells may well be needed, to watch where even trained warriors grow weary. I shall establish a web of such magics by next nightfall, and a duty watch rotation among all Buckler mages—myself and my, ah, wayward apprentice included."
The Tyrant reached to refill their goblets and said in dry tones, "Ah, yes: the valiant Brandor. My daughter has told me of some quite clever but dangerous pranks he's pulled. Daring, for so young an apprentice."
"Foolish, rather, lord," Druskin said, his voice sharp with anger. His hand came down on the table in a loud slap. "We dare not let him continue with such foolishness, when all our lives may be at stake! I should have curbed him, I own, long ago, but I must break him of the habit now. Right now."
He rose in a swirling of robes, refusing another goblet with an imperiously raised hand—only to turn in surprise, a stride short of the door, at the unmistakable sound of boots striding along firmly behind him. Two pairs of boots.
"My lords," Druskin protested, "it's customary for disciplinary dealings between master and 'prentice to be conducted in private."
The Tyrant smiled. "Nay, Sir Mage, I want to watch this little confrontation. After all, we starve for excitement... in this place where guards snore at their posts."
The senior mage of the Bucklers reddened. "You may be assured, lord, that I shall make Brandor apologize to you, on bended knee and as prettily as he knows how, for that little remark."
He turned again to the door, and in a swirling of robes and fine tunics and ornate sleeves, they hastened out together.
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The little green door in the darkest alcove of the kitchen opened, as he'd known it would, and Shalara came out, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. Her talks with Halger (and the

wine that accompanied them) always left her emboldened. Brandor loved to talk with her then, when her mood made her tongue outrun her reserve and let her swift wit shine. They'd laughed together many a time, with Halger smiling his slow smile nearby.

He'd been awaiting this moment, knowing that Shalara would stop to look in on the potato-peeling miscreant on her way back to her own rooms. With the cook striding along in her wake, the Tyrant's daughter swept imperiously past the feasting-spits and the cutting tables to where Brandor should have been hard at his peeling—and came to an astonished halt. Her lips twisted.

The pile of potatoes stood almost untouched, very much as she remembered it. Brandor Pupil-of-Druskin was standing in front of that earth-caked mound wearing a satisfied smile, his arms folded across his chest in the manner of a conqueror.

Shalara put her hands on her slender hips, her eyes snapping on the amused edge of anger. "And what by all the good gods, Sir Prentice, have you been up to?"

Brandor flung out a proud hand toward a long row of large barrels on the roll-rails behind him. "Lady fair, the latest shipment of the oysters we all love so much has just been delivered—and in the brief time 'twixt then and now, I've devised a spell to cook all of them inside the barrels."

Despite herself, Shalara was interested. She was always interested in new ways and ideas. "Oh? How so?"

Brandor caught up Halger's long tongs—heavy, man-length metal pincers used for raking coals and setting wood into the large hearth fires—and gestured at the stop-log that held the barrels in place. "With yon spar removed, these barrels will roll, prodded along with these tongs. My spell creates an enchanted space or field of intense heat, but no flame to scorch the wood. We wait, the oysters cook, with luck the barrels don't burn, and—there we have it! I'm just about to try it on the first barrel now. Would you care to

watch?"
The Tyrant's daughter shrugged and smiled. "I've no doubt you're going to pay dearly for this, Brandor," she said, as Halger looked at the apprentice over her shoulder, amusement warring with interest on his weathered face, "but the fiasco should be interesting to see."
"One barrel only, mind!" Halger growled. "Ruin an entire shipment, lad, and they'll have me cooking you for evenfeast! And what good are barrels turned to ash? We reuse them, you idiot!"
The cook's words rose like angry arrows to the ears of the Tyrant, the wizard Druskin, and the Buckler commander as they came out onto a balcony overlooking the mound of potatoes. The mage stiffened, but the Tyrant put a firm hand on his arm and murmured, "Hold peace and silence for now. Let us watch and learn for a bit."
Druskin gave him a glare of mingled astonishment and embarrassment, but clamped his lips together and turned his burning gaze to the scene below.
Brandor saw that movement and glanced up. At the sight of the three most powerful men in all Mintarn looking back down at him, two faces coolly calm but his master quivering with suppressed rage, the apprentice went pale.
The Buckler commander—his commander—leaned forward and said calmly, "Pray proceed, Brandor. One last prank? Or a clever stratagem that can benefit us all? For your future, I hope 'tis the latter. The true value of a warrior is less often bold innovation than minstrels would have us believe. More often, 'tis in carrying out the drudge duties of potato-peeling—or, yes, of watching at our posts without snoring—than in all the glorious charges and bloodily victorious attacks that all too many bards sing about. But I'm sure your master will have more pointed words to address to you in the near future. Cast your spell, and redeem yourself if you can."
Brandor trembled, managed a sickly smile, and stared down at his hands. What else could he do but cast the spell?

He drew in a deep breath, turned his back on them all, and worked his latest magic.

The barrel rolled with only a slight creaking when he prodded it with the long tongs, but the heat—which instantly sent the reek of swamp water throughout the kitchens—soon popped one of its ends slightly askew.

An immediate squalling arose from inside the barrel, and the endpiece was sent flying amid a stinking green torrent of water. Brandor saw a glistening wet hide, staring froglike eyes, and a curve-bladed cutlass vying with a short spear for the pleasure of enthusiastically ending a certain apprentice's life.

"A-a bullywug?" he asked Faerun around him in utter astonishment, as he thrust desperately at it with the long tongs, trying to keep it in the spell-field where it would be cooked alive.

He was almost shoved off his feet by the bully wug's writhing and head-down charging. As he clenched his teeth and fought back, Brandor became suddenly and acutely aware that the only thing keeping the swamp monster from leaping around the kitchen to slay at will were his own hands on the long tongs and whatever skills he might acquire in its use in, say, his next five panting breaths or so.

The hearthgirls chose that moment to scream. The kitchen promptly erupted into a loud chaos of surprise and alarm that almost drowned out the hisses of the bully wug and the bright songs of alarm gongs being struck all at once by Halger and the men on the balcony.

It seemed an eternity of sweaty, desperate struggling before the Tyrant, Commander Maerlin, and a small, hurrying army of men-at-arms arrived at Brandor's side. By then, the bullywug was on the floor, clawing feebly at the air and darkening rapidly, as steam gouted from its gaping mouth. The smell made Brandor gag.

The armsmen swarmed up around the barrels, rolling them into Brandor's field under barked orders and breaking them

open with axes. Squalling bullwugs were pierced with spears and pinned in place to cook with brutal speed and efficiency. Brandor rolled barrels into the heat with the heavy, unwieldy long tongs like a madman until someone— the Tyrant of Mintarn himself—took him by the shoulder and shouted at him to stop and stand easy.

When he let the long tongs fall, Brandor found that he was shaking with weariness. He looked across a kitchen that stank with carnage, where Shalara, Druskin, and the other two Buckler mages were on their knees, white-faced and retching, and grim armsmen were clambering about knee-deep in wet, bloody bullywugs. Oh, he was going to catch it now...

Commander Maerlin was wading grimly through the remains toward him. Brandor closed his eyes and waited for the cold words that would end his Buckler career and direct him to a cell.

The hand that came down on his shoulder gripped warmly, and out of a dizzy fog Brandor heard Oldivar Maerlin say, "Well and bravely done, lad. Thanks."

From his other side came the sound of Druskin clearing his throat. The wizard sounded a little breathless as he said, "You'll teach us all that spell, I hope. I'll exchange four of comparable force for it, of course."

"Moreover, you've saved Mintarn," the Tyrant said from nearby, his voice rolling out to carry to every corner of the lofty room, "and Mintarn is in your debt. I see no reason that Mintarn cannot reward you fittingly in the days ahead."

Brandor lifted his head, then, to stare at the ruler of Mintarn in astonishment, but somehow his gaze was caught and held by the shining eyes of Shalara. They stared at each other for a long, wordless time, until Brandor became aware that the movement he'd been noticing out of the corner of his eye was a broad and knowing smile growing across the Tyrant's face.

Brandor's face flamed and he looked down quickly. Then he

bent, fished around in the gore at his feet, and came up with something that was small and bloody, but unmistakably a weapon.
"Hold hard!" said the Tyrant in alarm, stepping back. "What's that for?"
"The drudge duty of potato peeling," Brandor replied in a voice that quavered only a little. He waved with his knife at the mound of potatoes. "The true value of a warrior, sir."
A slow smile grew on the Tyrant's face. "Really?" he replied, "and here I thought it was doing guard duty snoring at posts."
Shalara's high, tinkling laughter rose over the chorus of deep warriors' chuckles at that. Brandor, who was busily turning all shades of red as the Tyrant dealt him a friendly slap on the back, thought it was the most glorious sound he'd ever heard.
Introduction
LIVING FOREVER
I know what grips me about the ruined city of Myth Drannor: it's the thought of all that cool magic and enthralling secrets just lying in the overgrown, crumbling shade and shattered chambers, awaiting anyone bold—or foolish—enough to brave the known dangers of a multitude of lurking, slithering beasts. I hunger to be the one to find the lost treasures and lay bare their secrets—and when it's playtime, to swoop and soar around the crumbling towers, rendered invincible by magic, laughingly defying the jaws and claws that strike at me.
Ever since I first kit upon the idea ofmythals and this most infamous and spectacular of ruined cities encloaked by them, and strolled around it in my mind's eyes, Myth Drannor has gripped me like this.
I can only conclude—several novels (not just by me), lorebooks, and computer games later—that it has a similar attraction for others. In a shorter form, this story of mine, "Living Forever," appeared in the game manual of the most

recent computer game set in Myth Drannor.
In this little tale of mine, I was trying to set the creepy, lurking mood of the ruined, once-magnificent city, not—beyond a few cryptic comments best interpreted in hindsight—hint at secrets of the computer game. After all, my friend Carrie Bebris, a writer I admire, was tackling just that task in a novel at the time.
A mood piece, then. (Wheel Cue for fun...)
Ahem. I'll just shrug this straitjacket back on and inform the waiting world that this story begins (and ends) on the soft, dusking evening of the second day ofMarpenoth in the Year of the Tankard (1370 DR).
Volo seemed to almost sigh when he wrote of Myth Drannor, thus: "Splendors unmatched—or so we're told. Dancing, sophistication, and spells beyond compare, now fallen into a yawning mass grave that reaches forth dark claws and drags down adventurer after lair-seeking brigand after lost forester after overcurious sage, in a great and ever-growing host of the dead—and worse, the not-quite-dead. And still its treasures shine, beckoning with deadly glows and fires by night, drawing others to their dooms. Watching them is daily sport to some. Take yonder seat and you, too, can join the ghoulish audience. You won't have to wait long for blood."
Read on. It seems Volo was right, for once.
LIVING FOREVER
Fear me, oh yes. I am fearsome and awesome. I am Ondruu, and I will live forever.
Once I was tall, spare, and strong, my eyes green flames as I strode Cormanthor cloaked in my power, chuckling silently as I surveyed elven fancy. Ladies of the Fair Folk looked at me sidelong, and again—and when they saw me alone, drifted out of nightshadows to do more than look.
They'd never seen a man so graceful and fine of face and form, nor one who could spin spells as effortlessly as the Srinshee, magics cleverer and stronger than the craftings of the haughtiest Starym archmage.

Oh yes, I was something to behold.
Now you think me a ghost and stare amazed, thrusting your blades at the twinkling of lights I trail ... but I am not where you believe me to be.
I am here, in the spell-knotted heart of this fist-sized emerald—see how I sparkle?—in the hilt of Talath Mornyr's swiftwing sword. Yes, in my favorite place, sliding through the ever-glowing maze of soft-woven dweomers wherein old Eloedar Lyrindralee captured the crowning magic that makes the blade fly like a bird, across half Faerun if need be, to return to its bearer's home carrying a transfixed message, or a token bound to it, or even a stolen spell.
Ah, but you begin to forget me, and relax.
So now I quit the blade and fly past ears and over heads—hah!
Carve the air if you will, futile swordswingers! See if you can make it bleed, where even gods fail!
Chuckling silently, I alight in this glass flower, amethysts and amber melted and shaped by Sarsaree the Weaver, glowing like kindling flame now as I dance, awakening spell-locked scents that have lasted a thousand years and will prickle noses for another thousand. Nay, strike not at such beauty, or I'll thrust you through with lightnings and leave your boots full of ashes for the next fools to find!
Away I'll fly, if your blades are your answers to my every glimmer and shimmerburst!
Away, to make many-pillared Aladaen Hall awaken and sing, the ghosts of elven ladies dancing again in the depths of its huge crystal pillars.
Then to the Harpstones beyond, to send forth tunes through crumbling towers that have not heard such sounds for centuries . . . and on, ahead of your hurrying boots, to where the armors of Faeravarra drift and float, dark and gleaming and deadly, awaiting but my thoughts to send them swooping into battle! Blood you want so thirstily, intruders?
Blood you shall have, bright rains of it—and all your own!

Yes, I am Ondruu, and you should fear me. You will fear me.
And yet, pause now, a-panting and wild-eyed, and think on this: I am the most noble of those who tarry here, spirits riding the Mythal like breezes.
Oh, yes. I know mercy—and show it to others, as did the Lady Steel whose remembered beauty sears my heart still. The Dark Ones know rather less of mercy.
They ride the Mythal too, more cruel than clever: drow, drained and enslaved here by one who has the gall to tamper with the Mythal.
She. She who thinks herself Queen of Myth Drannor, and makes the Mythal a crude weapon and a spark for her puling spells. She looks only for her own reward and sees all beings as things, tools to be wielded—but sees not beyond tomorrow.
I've known many men thus, but few such among women who spin spells. One, I say, is more than enough.
If you meet with her, you'll know it—even before she drains you. Madness is in her eyes. She must have more, ever more... more power and more souls. With the Mythal she makes greater her fell thralls, not-dragons and once-dragon and all, and casts forth draining radiances in pools far from this greatest city of all, to drive down men like cattle in distant lands and grow ever greater.
Perhaps she thinks to ascend among the gods, a new star blazing up among old. Where else does such power point? And yet I've seen stars fall even from those shining heights. And bright though her power blazes, she's not yet even sensed Ondruu—or any of the other watchful spirits who ride the Mythal.
If she goes too far and calls on her dark vessel to do the wrong thing, we'll boil up out of cellars, mossy spires, forgotten crypts, suddenly blazing runes, and buried coffers all over this root-split, leaf-choked, proud ruin of a city, and shine forth in our wrath ere we descend on her, in all our chilling, howling glory.

Aye, cower, intruders! We are more than just voices moaning in the wind. Some of us were trapped here, and some embraced the Mythal as it formed. Others sank into it when they wearied of daily deeds, or when fiends came upon them in the Fall and sought to tear Myth-folk limb from limb—there! See? That twinkling of lights in yonder dark arch, across the rubble that was once Alaungaleir House?

Behold another spirit of the Mythal, regarding you now: Amanthala, Dark Lady of the Nornaneir, the darkest sorceresses of Myth Drannor. She bathed in blood—her own, and that of human women who gave it willingly, and in turn tasted blue elven firewine and lived longer. Long ago that was, and she misses it. She hates the soulless dark-ears even more than Ondruu, and the not-dragons, too... and most of all, this upstart not-queen with her overbold spells and her careless graspings at power.

She should have turned to our road long since, to live forever within the Mythal and of the Mythal, glorying in its song. The song of a thousand mages and more, who gave of themselves as they bound powers into it, and played those powers like harpstrings to do new things, keeping the Mythal alive, vital, and growing.

I miss those days. The Mythal has not reached forth in new splendor for too many long years, now. It goes less far than it once did; I can no longer soar over the lights of Sembia, or stand in the night air between the stars and the Moonsea. There are darknesses and fadings within it, and none to weave, mend, and brighten Myth Drannor again.

Yet see me dance now, away from brooding Amanthala to this balcony choked with trailing vines and the bones of fiends. Here they died—final falls, just as toads, foxes, and most men die, their spirits blasted and consumed by the floating sphere at their heart. Oh, yes, Daraedyntyr: smooth, dark, and round, a black gem as big as six mens' heads, floating so serenely among the fused bones.. ..waiting.

Waiting to slay you, if you dare to touch it. I can dance here

in its dark heart, amid the deadly magics stirring even now, because I am half a ghost.
And that is Tyche's own favor on you, for Ondruu was not the least among mighty battle-mages, and—I daresay—one of the very few who enjoyed dealing death and striving against foes. Oh, yes, your luck would have failed ere now, wildsword adventurers, if I had my body still...
O-
"Again, see? Almost as if it's... taunting us."
Delmoene's voice seemed almost lazy, but its casualness fooled none of her companions. The agitated flashings of the sentient gems set into her gauntlets might have had something to do with that.
"So? 'Tis a ghost—a pranksome ghost, that seeks to lure us astray into doom. Think you no one died here?" The growling warrior looked at the moss-girt, leaning tower on their left, then peered quickly at the moss-girt, soaring tower on their right.
"Why," he added slowly, looking again to the left, "fiends must have bounded over all these stones, tearing elves apart with their claws in a storm of slaughter!"
"Thank you, Solor," Delmoene said icily. "Just the cheerful image I needed, with dusk coming down fast and no time to walk back out."
"I say again: Teleport us back to the clearing and we'll use the gate again tomorrow,'' another warrior said in exasperation. "I'm not smitten at the thought of spending a night here, either!"
The fair-haired sorceress had known the kisses of both men before, but her patience with thick-headed warriors had run out for this dying day. "Baerlor," Delmoene asked almost gently, "did you or did you not see Rathkra blasted to blood-spray when she tried to teleport, back by the broken bridge?"
Baerlor shrugged. "That might have been just there. We ca—"

"Baerlor, Rathkra is about the twoscore and third mage I know of who died trying a translocational spell in Myth Drannor. I'm not about to become the twoscore and fourth."
The warrior waved his glittering sword angrily. "The Mythal's not supposed to let anyone open gates into the heart of the city, either, yet here we are!"
"Yes, but we don't know who crafted the gate—it might've been part of the Mythal all along! Why can't you think for a breath or two, all of you, before opening your big—*
The ground under Solor's boots erupted in tentacles—a dozen, racing up as high as five Solors and more, ere stabbing back down again.
Delmoene didn't spare time to scream, but Baerlor did. They were all running back the way they'd come by then, as hard and as fast as their boots could take them over broken stone, vines, and slippery moss, racing for the stone steps that would take them back out of this dell, and—
Delmoene crashed into Baerlor's back, spun away, and caught her balance with a curse. "Loviatar lash you, Baer, what're you—oh!"
The stair was occupied. Gasping adventurers stared into the cold, gentle smiles of about a hundred dark-armored drow.
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Oh, yes. The Hungry One's tentacles behind you, the drained drow before you. No time now to wave swords at me, hey?
I am Ondruu, and I will live forever.
Introduction
THE LONG ROAD HOME
In truth, I'd always rather walk down Wodekouse Way or Pratchett Path than wallow in grim death, blood, and tragedy, but if the Realms is to seem as real to a newcomer reading about it for the first time as it does to me, it must have its darker moments.
Moreover, there's a strong human desire to "Be There and See AW when important events are happening, and Realms

novels that cover dramatic dooms and cosmic changes certainly sell well enough to suggest Realms fans are decidedly human.

In this case, the doom was that of King Azoun of Cormyr, the handsome and nigh-ageless fourth monarch of that name to rule the Forest Kingdom. The Purple Dragon, a beloved, handsome figure of war-success and long, stable rule. Troy Denning and your humble scribe wrote of Azoun's fall in the novel Death of the Dragon, and I've revisited Cormyr since in the novel Elminster's Daughter.

But what of the time just after Azoun's funeral, when the kingdom that was no longer his struggled to face his absence and go onward together, rather than

falling apart under the tugging talons of long-simmering resentments, feuds, and ambitions of all too many Obarskyr-hating nobles?

Aye, what of it? Well, in answer I present this new tale that begins on the second day of Flamerule, in the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371DR).

Change is here forced upon a kingdom, andAlusair must try her hand at ruling. Volo once dared to say this about another ruler, The Simbul of Aglarond, who wrote that her duty was to let loose the reins of change: "I thought the duty of a ruler was to grab the reins of change, hold on tight, and try a little steering!"

THE LONG ROAD HOME

That second day of Flamerule was well past highsun by the time six Purple Dragons reined in amid a cloud of road dust under the signpost where the ways met. Without a word to the curiously-staring folk of Hultail, one of them stood in his stirrups to hammer the broad signboard another handed him to the old post.

By the time he was done and sat back in his creaking saddle to survey his work and wearily wipe dust from his lips, half Hultail had gathered around the Crown warriors and were peering up to read what the sign said:

All Cormyr mourns its beloved King, Azoun Obarskyr, fourth of that name, lately fallen in glorious battle personally slaying "the Devil Dragon." In delivering the realm from this titanic red dragon and her ore and goblin armies, the Purple Dragon laid down his life without hesitation, displaying to the last the courage and battle prowess that have made him especially beloved of the warriors who've served under him.

A just and greatly loved king, Azoun reigned long and well; most Cormyreans alive today have known no other occupant of the Dragon Throne. The only son ofRhigaerd II and his queen Tanalusta Truesilver, Azoun is survived by his Queen, Filfaeril.

The Dowager Queen has named her only surviving child Regent. Princess AlusairNacacia shall guide Cormyr as "Steel Regent" until Azoun's grandson shall come of age. Azoun V, rightful ruler of the Forest Kingdom, is the only son of the Crown Princess Tanalasta, who also perished in heroic battle. The whereabouts of the infant king's father, Rowen Cormaeril, are unknown; he, too, may have died fighting to deliver the realm from the fell evils of the sinister ghazneths.

The fallen Azoun was beloved of many Cormyreans; he was a personal friend to many noble ladies, yeomen, and farmfolk of the realm. As the minstrel Rauth Rindrel said of him, the Purple Dragon was "a man who looked any Cormyrean in the eye as an equal—and when he looked at you, the looking made you feel warm, befriended, and of consequence. Ill miss that—and so will many, many folk of the realm. He shall be sorely missed. I fear none of us shall see so great a king again."

I know that same fear. Grieve, Cormyr, and let him never be forgotten, that his name and the tales told of him will still comfort, cloak, and embolden all good folk of this realm down the long years after he has gone.

Elminster of Shadowdale

"Who's he, then?"

"Know you not the King? Why, dolt, he—" "No, no: Elminster,

dunghead! Who's Elminster of Shadowdale?"
Whatever incredulous answer the older man started to utter then was lost forever in the sound of fresh hammering as the proclamation-poster stood up from his saddle again, a new and smaller plaque in his hand, and set to work affixing it under the first.
This one read:
Sound the deep drum.
The lion I am proud to love
Has fallen, that Cormyr might stand.
Some kings are but old names
On crumbling tombs
Sounds in a roll chanted at Candlekeep
No more.
MyAzoun shall not be so easily forgotten,
Ask any Tuigan.
Raise a cup in his memory
And be happy, as I am.
He was mine, down long golden years
The gods granted us that.
He was Cormyr's, all his years.
The gods gave that gift to us all.
Aye, be happy.
No tears can bring him back. Why cry now
From the gates and the battlements Until all the mountainsides roar back griefs thunder?
My love is gone
The sun set over the realm
All glory fallen
I shall never see Cormyr so bright again.
Her Royal Majesty Queen Filfaeril Obarskyr
There was a respectful sigh from many throats, and more than one cap was doffed and pressed to its owner's chest. "The gods keep her," one man muttered.
"Aye, poor queen," said someone else, but a third someone snorted.

"Seems almost happy to see the back of him, she does. 'Be happy' she says there—twice. Seems all his bedhopping rankles still."
"Bite back those words, you! She but bids us be lighthearted—look you the last line? She weeps, fool, she weeps!"
"I ask again: who's this Elminster, to get high banner over our queen?"
"Man, have ye grown up deaf and blind, both? No one's not heard of the Old Mage of Shadowdale!"
"Ah, but he's just tall tales, fireside fancies grown in the telling, not real."
"Oh, he's real enough," one of the helmed warriors said from his saddle, his words as grim as they were unexpected. "As you'll learn right quick if you ever have the misfortune to meet him."
There was a little silence as Hultailen stared at the Purple Dragon who'd spoken, then back up at the writings to read and re-read them.
The older man turned away first, to spit thoughtfully and growl, "Aye, 'twill be a hard winter ahead and more after it, to be sure. We've seen the glory days, lads—and they died with our Azoun, on that hilltop with the Devil Dragon."
Then he stopped in his tavern-toward trudging to wheel around so suddenly that men starting to shuffle in his wake almost crashed noses with him, and hissed fiercely, "But he slew it ere he died, lads, he did! Remember that. He did his duty by us, like a true blade o' Cormyr!"
"Aye," someone agreed, unhappily.
"Aye," someone else echoed, even less enthusiastically. And the slow trudge toward the tavern resumed, leaving the six riders almost alone again.
They exchanged glances, then in unspoken accord turned their horses' heads toward the dark and sagging Sixcandles Inn, giving it the same narrow-eyed glares they might have given a known foe across a battlefield.
A Hultailen who was slower of foot than most stared after

them curiously, then drew her shawl more closely around her shoulders and peered up at the signs they'd affixed. As she struggled along the lines of script, tackling each word in turn, her lips moved, murmuring syllables.
"I shall never see Cormyr so bright again..."
¦©¦•©¦¦©¦<§>¦
As Glarasteer Rhauligan led the three Purple Dragons and the two War Wizards who were only pretending to be warriors into the dimly-lit forechamber of the Sixcandles, a traveling merchant from Suzail was grandly describing Azoun's funeral to a dozen wealthy Hultailen over steaming platters of boar.
"Nay, nay, the funeral befell on the eleventh of Kythorn—hah! Dispute it, dare ye? I was there, mark ye!"
"Yes, yes," a little pudding-faced man whom Rhauligan knew to be the best baker in Hultail said hastily, waving his hands as if he could soothe all disagreements away, " 'twas just as you say, of course—how could it not be? But say on, I pray thee! Tell us more!"
"Well, now," said the Suzailan, drawing himself upright in his chair and patting his ample belly with every air of preening satisfaction, "I'll do that—I will. Hearken ye, then."
And he bent forward like a dog thrusting a questing head under a bed, and whispered in a raw voice that carried to every corner of the forechamber like a war horn, "They paraded 'em through the streets, the king and the fallen princess both—and strike me down before the altars of all the gods if they weren't smiling. Dead, white as bone, and grinning like they'd learned some great secret at the last. I'm told the War Wizards had spells ready to ward off anything hurled at the royal remains."
"Hey?" a Hultailen tailor asked, frowning. "Like what? Flowers?"
Baerlothur of Suzail smiled a little smugly and replied, "Incendiaries. Thrown by those who serve some of our exiled nobles. I might add that such were expected, but not seen."

"Huh," a tall, long-nosed smith said dismissively. "A lot of weeping and wailing and Purple Dragons shoving folk back out of the way—glad I missed it."
"Oh, no," the Suzailan said softly, glaring around at his audience with sudden fire in his eyes, "that's where ye're very wrong, goodmen. 'Twas eerie."
"Eerie?"
"Aye. All silent but for the sobbing and footfalls, with Princess Alusair and Queen Filfaeril walking at the front of the coffins. The folk of the city all along the route did the same thing, as precise as if they'd been drilled for a tenday by the Dragons: without an order from anyone, a-following their station in life, they all knelt or saluted. Then they got up and tried to touch the coffin-bearers, gentle-like, barehanded. Then, like silent soldiers, they fell in behind the dead, joining the procession. Most of Suzail, walking. I don't mind telling ye I was scared, right down to my boots."
"Scared?"
"Some idiot out of Westgate made the mistake of laughing at a friend's smart remark—and the goodwives swarmed him! Tore him apart with their bare hands, they did, shrieking out the names of their battle-dead! Why, I'd've backed the women of Cormyr that afternoon, barehanded as they were, 'gainst all the mercenary blades all Sembia can afford to whelm—aye, even reinforced by the Flaming Fist and the massed Tuigan Horde both. So full of tears and rage were they that they feared nothing, and would've challenged Tempus, Lord of Battles, himself! I saw a warrior of Westgate draw sword in desperate frenzy, and an old matron smashed aside that blade as if it were a child's twig, heedless of the cuts it gave her, to get at the man behind it. Hear me: I'll never sneer at any goodwife of this land, ever again."
The smith waved his hand and growled, "Ah, but for all that they're dead. Dead and gone, Azoun and his daughter both, an' we have a babe as king."

"Azoun Rhigaerd Palaghard Duar Obarskyr, Dragon Prince of Cormyr, Right Royal Duke of Suzail, and King Ascendant of the Dragon Throne, Stagmaster of the Realm and Lord Admiral of the Western Fallen Star Waves," the baker chanted happily, barely pausing for breath. Then he looked eagerly at the Suzailan and asked, "Have you seen him?"

Baerlothur snorted. "Since the Anointing, no one outside the Royal Court has seen him. Vangerdahast sees charm spells and kidnappings and child-swappings everywhere, so not only does the brat have Purple Dragons all around him in a ring while he gurgles, coos, and wets himself, but he has a handcount of War Wizards spell-scrying him, them, and the rooms around, every last breath of every day. 'Tis going to be a long twenty years for that lad."

"Is he—healthy? Like to grow up to wear armor as heavy as his father?"

"Well, I've heard this much: our fifth Azoun is much given to gurgling, chortling, and imitating the lowest-pitched speech he hears—mens' snorts, growls, and muttered curses."

There were chuckles all around the table.

Then the smith said, "Well, if summat takes him to the grave—marsh fever, not just poison or a blade—I'm sure as I know my own name that our Royal Magician has the lad's blood and all else he needs to enspell him back to life, even—"

"Hist!" the Suzailan snapped hastily, waving an urgent hand. "Not one word more on this! To talk of this is manacles in a cell and War Wizard probings—an' if they find any treason in thy thoughts—thy thoughts, mind—then 'tis death, after. Otherwise, exile for outlanders, and a fine for the likes of us."

"Holy Throne!" the smith swore, slamming down his tankard. "What madness is that? Harm a man of Cormyr for speaking of the safety of the succession? This smacks of the highhandedness of the Steel Bitch to me!"

The baker reeled as if the smith had slapped him and asked faintly, "Speak you of the Princess Alusair?"

"Aye, Madam High Steel Regent or whatever she's calling herself these days! Why, I—"

Cold steel flashed in the gloom as it appeared across the smith's throat from behind, causing him to fall silent in mid-snarl. His fearful eyes widened above that warsword as its owner smoothly finished the smith's aborted sentence for him: "—have come suddenly to my senses and realize the utter folly of cursing the ruler of our fair realm merely because of my unfounded judgment of her character."

Then the steel was gone and the smith was reeling in his seat from a solid cuff to one ear, as one might give a disobedient boy.

The men at the table stared up at the Purple Dragon standing behind the smith's chair, suddenly and uncomfortably aware that other Dragons were standing behind their own seats.

"Apologize," the man with the warsword in his hand added quietly. "Not to me, but to the Princess Alusair. Now."

"I... who are y—"

"Apologize!"

The smith eyed the sword tip that had been thrust over his shoulder to glitter in his gaze once more, and muttered hastily, "I'm sorry. I—I apologize for what I said about the princess."

"Accepted," was the curt reply.

Baerlothur of Suzail glared up at the Purple Dragon. "So you've had your apology, and I ask this: who are you, Dragon, to draw sword on a honest goodman of Cormyr?"

The grim man in armor met his glare with cold, level eyes, and raised his voice so it could be heard right across the fore-chamber. "Rhauligan is my name. Sir Glarasteer Rhauligan, if you want to get it right when you complain. I'm here to scour out this inn."

" 'Scour out?' What by the Dragon Throne d'you mean by that?"

That angry query came from a hard-faced woman who'd

hastened out of an inner room to stand uncertainly beyond the ring of Purple Dragons.

Rhauligan turned to face her. "Rythra Matcham? Keeper of this inn?"

There were murmurs of surprise from the far corners of the forechamber and the woman replied, "Yes—and yes, since my Rorth died fighting beside the king these two months gone. How is it that you know my name?"

"The Court is not without its eyes and ears, Goodlady Matcham. I am sent here not to do anyone harm, if I find no need—but my orders are to be obeyed as if they came from the Royal Magician himself. My task is to see that this inn is safe for the Steel Regent to lodge in this night—safe from fire, from spell, and from drawn blade."

Rythra Matcham gaped at him as if he'd grown a second head from his shoulders; the head of Azoun IV, smiling at her with his crown on, and all. "I-uh-I—"

Rhauligan smiled at her. "The Crown will pay in good gold, of course. Plenty of it. There'll be Rorth's last pay and burial-price on top of that, too."

Rythra reeled, her face suddenly pale, and he threw out a hand to steady her.

She clutched it like tightening iron for just a moment, then threw back her head, drew in a deep breath, and said loudly, "I am honored. Command me in all ways, that this house be made fitting!"

Murmurs arose and grew as half the Hultailen who'd been idling over broth or ale at various tables in the forechamber hastened to finish and go out to tell all the village.

"End your spell, War Wizard," a female voice ordered firmly from behind Rhauligan. He whirled around.

A lone woman in leathers was standing behind him, a slender long sword in one hand and a dagger raised for throwing ready in the other. The point of her blade was right against the throat of one of the Purple Dragons who was really a War Wizard—and her dagger and gaze were bent on

the other disguised mage.
"And who are yo«, lady?" Rhauligan asked, a little wearily.
"Sharantyr is my name. I am a Knight of Myth Drannor."
Rhauligan sighed. "And I suppose you have your charter with you, adventurer?"
"No. Azoun told us we need no longer carry it."
"Lady," Rhauligan said carefully, "Azoun is dead."
"Alusair knows me and will confirm my right of arms," was the calm reply. The sword twitched. "Enrfyour spell, mage!"
Rhauligan sighed and made a little signal to the War Wizard, directing the man to do just that. This was obviously going to be a long day.
"Lady Sharantyr, are you staying here at the Sixcandles?"
"I am. And yes, before you ask, I'll walk with you and keep myself under your eye."
Eyeing her wry half-smile, Rhauligan sighed again. Yes, it was getting longer already.
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The stables smelled like stables always did and looked the part, too. However, the Sixcandles horsehouse lacked the proverbial amorous couple in the end stall—featuring instead a wild-haired, dirty-faced youth who was glaring at Rhauligan over his dungfork. "You really a Highknight?"
"Now where," Rhauligan asked patiently, "did you hear that?"
"Old Andur told me Highknights're the only Purple Dragons as can order about War Wizards."
"Old Andur, whoever he is," Rhauligan said shortly, "talks too much."
"Well, I don't know about that," the stableboy spat at him, "being as he's my father—and stands right behind you, now, with his fork ready at yer neck!"
Rhauligan hurled himself to one side before turning, straw crackling around him—then saw he need not have moved at all.
The scarred old veteran who'd been introduced to him as the

stablemaster at Sixcandles was indeed right behind him, pitchfork raised to stab, and was straining vainly to move it, sweating and furious, in the grip of the lady ranger in leathers, who stood just behind him.
"Drop it, Andur," she said softly. "Or have you forgotten the price of slaying an officer of the Court?"
With a bark of wordless fury, the stablemaster let go of his fork. It bounced against his shins painfully as Sharantyr released him, leaving Andur to stumble forward and clutch at his numbed arms.
"Damn you, woman!" he panted in pain. "May all the Watching Gods damn you!"
"They already have. I'm an adventurer, remember?"
"So much anger," Rhauligan said, looking from father to son. "Prudence tells me to chain the pair of you to some very distant tree and put courtiers to running the stables this night. So tell me why I should not."
Both men glared at him, breathing heavily, ere Andur growled, "I'm a good horse-master, and whatever hate I hold for anyone, I'll not take it out on their horses, nor let flame take my living from me, neither! This stables is mine, and I'll keep it right well! Knight, you can trust me that far!"
Rhauligan met his gaze. "I believe that." He turned to the son. "So, lad, your father hates enough to think about putting his fork through me, a man he's never met before. Doyo« hate anything that much?"
The stableboy gave him a puzzled look. "Uh... no."
"So why give me angry eyes, the moment I step in here?"
The lad reddened, looked down in vain hope his questioner might go away if left unregarded, then muttered, "You come here all high-an'-mighty orders, strutting about growling this and snapping that, and the hope of the realm is gone and swept away. What life lies ahead for me?"
Rhauligan nodded, then turned back to Andur. "You were a Purple Dragon, yet stood ready to fell me. Why? What fury lives in you?"

If his son had been red, Andur was almost black with anger and shame. Black and shaking.
"When my lord Azoun needed me this spring, I got down my old sword and went," he snapped, biting off each word as if grudging its use. "Off to the wars, with my master Rorth, like the old days. He, and lots more like him, died for our king—and we'd do it again! But he's gone now, gone down fighting, and who's Cormyr left with? His slut of a second daughter, with all her loose ways! I despair, Highknight. I despair for our fair land under her rule."
He'd picked up his fork, but now turned and handed it to Sharantyr, adding, "So cut me down for my treasonous words and let me not live to see fair Cormyr dragged down into darkness."
Rhauligan sighed. "I kill no one for their opinions." He shook his head and added, "So long as you can manage to be at least civil to the princess, if you speak to her."
"I'll use my tongue and not my fork, if that's what you mean."
"That's exactly what I mean." Rhauligan sighed again and turned away. "I hope Goodlady Matcham can find it in herself to be more welcoming than you are."
"I doubt it," Andur growled. "She blames Rorth's death on Alusair's dashing about the backlands waving a blade instead of standing beside the king that day. She might just spit and claw at her Majesty on first sight, instead of showing her to her room."
Rhauligan rolled his eyes. A very long day.
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The revealed War Wizards no longer bothered to hide their magic and had crafted a careful spell to wet the roads just enough to quell the dust but not bring mud. Wherefore all assembled Hultail could clearly see the score of riders urging their mounts from trot to canter, to arrive at the Sixcandles porch in high style.
They peered in vain for a crown or dragonhelm, for gleaming

armor or glistening jewels. More than a few of them had already sighed in disappointment and stepped back to look down the road for a second and grander band of riders as the newcomers reined in.

The woman at their head had unbound hair and wore a plain fighting-harness of worn and patched leathers such as a mercenary might prefer—but when she sprang down from her saddle and strode up the steps of the Sixcandles, the grim Highknight who'd spent the day turning the inn upside down emerged and knelt to her.

There was a sudden hush of awe and surprise—this, the Steel Regent?—then the infamous Princess Alusair turned and gave the gathered Hultailen a wave and a grin.

They stared at dirty and tousled ash-blonde hair, merry brown eyes, and eyebrows as black as coal. She was—beautiful. Slender, wild, and beautiful.

Her every movement smooth and yet those of a fighting man and not a demure maid, she caught hold of her scabbarded sword to keep it from tangling in her boots like any armsman might, raised Rhauligan to his feet and kissed him roundly on the mouth—awakening a loud murmur of astonishment and disapproval—and strode into the Sixcandles with him hastening after.

"Gods above," one goodwife said disappointedly. "Not even a crown!"

"More to the point: no armor," an old man beside her growled. "Any bow could have taken her life right in front of us! Little fool!"

"Nay," the Suzailan merchant put in, "saw you her ring? The glowing one? Award against weapons, to be sure! We've seen something of Alusair in Suzail, I tell you, and—"

But by then he was standing alone and talking to the rear ends of departing horses, and the backsides of hastening villagers. Hultail was hastening up the steps of the inn, to see something of Alusair for themselves.

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The innkeeper was white and trembling. Alusair went straight to her, spreading her hands as if welcoming a long lost sister. "Goodlady Matcham?"
Mutely the woman nodded, then Alusair's arms were around her.
"Your Rorth died well," the Steel Regent said almost fiercely as they stood nose to nose, "fighting the Devil Dragon herself! He died defending his king, and so helped keep my father alive until the fell wyrm could be defeated—and for that all Cormyr owes Rorth Matcham honor."
The innkeeper stared into the face of the princess, mouth working—then burst into tears, sobbing helplessly in Alusair's arms.
The folk crowded into the forechamber kept utterly silent as the Steel Regent rocked Rythra Matcham, murmuring gentle words, for a long, long time ere the innkeeper pulled gently away and sobbed something almost incoherent to Alusair.
The princess took her hand and replied, "You've nothing to be ashamed about, Rythra. I've cried many nights since my father went into that crypt—and I'll cry again. Gods, I miss him!"
Her free hand clenched into a fist, then she sighed, threw her head back as if gasping for air, and announced, "If the cellars here are wet enough, the Regent of Cormyr would be pleased if all Hultail, and wayfarers guesting here, too, drank the health of Rorth Matcham, hero of the Dragonfall Battle—and his lady Rythra Matcham, good host of the Sixcandles Inn! The Crown will pay for all, provender and drink, as long as both last!"
The answering roar of approval was almost deafening. Rhauligan winced. That cellar was full of great tuns of wine, most of them full of potent vintages only months away from becoming vinegar.
It was going to be a long night, too.
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The lightening grayness to the east told of dawn soon to -

come, but there were still folk on their feet in the forechamber of the Sixcandles. Only a handful, amid all the snoring flesh draped over chairs, tables, and the floor—but that handful was lively enough.

Four candles ago, tables had been shoved to the walls at one end of the room to clear space for dancing, and many ragged tunes had been inflicted on drunken ears as the bolder Hultailen lads and lasses had panted and twirled about under the coldly vigilant eyes of a dozen Purple Dragons and almost that many War Wizards.

Most of the dancers were now gone—into slumber or out into the night, to either their beds or to pursuits best undertaken in some privacy—leaving a lone couple on the dancing floor.

The Steel Regent herself was whirling about the floor to the eerie duet of an unseen, conjured harp and shawm. Matching her in the dance, measure for measure, was the Sixcandles stableboy, his eyes wide with shining wonder.

Anon, Alusair threw up her hand in a signal, and the music turned slow and stately. The lad stopped, unsure of what to do—but the Princess Alusair Nacacia, her expression going serene and serious, stepped into his arms, guided his hands to her hips, and led him smoothly into a court dance that—

"Stop, woman!"

The shout roused Rythra Matcham from her doze, sitting with the hardiest women of the village all along one side of the dancing floor, but by then the stablemaster it had burst from had come to a glowering halt against a fence of steel: a barrier of four crossed Purple Dragon blades.

More than a few Hultailen blinked awake and slid into being aghast in the time it took them to clear their eyes.

The lad pressed against Alusair groaned and tried to shrink away, but the princess caught his wrist and commanded, "Aside steel, men, and let that man through."

Andur found his way to the dancing floor clear. He strode forward, ignoring the risings of Rhauligan and Sharantyr from their seats and the beseeching look of despair the

innkeeper gave him.
"Stand away from my son! Regent of the realm and royal blooded you may be—but we've all heard of your wanton ways, and your temper, too! Just keep you well away from my Darnen!"
Alusair let go of Darnen's wrist and he fled across the room like an arrow sped from a bow. Folding her arms across her chest, face expressionless, she awaited the stablemaster .. . whose angry advance slowed, faltered, then came to a halt a few paces away from her.
"You'll kill me, of course," he spat, "but it needed to be said. You're a wanton slut unfit to be anywhere near the Dragon Throne that I and so many like me have fought to uphold."
Alusair sighed. "What's your name, man?"
"Andur. Andur Imraith, once a Purple Dragon, now stable-master here. They call me Old Andur."
The Steel Regent nodded. "Andur, I've just three things to say to you."
She waited until there was utter silence and all the room was listening. That took less than a breath.
"The first is: you're right. I am a wanton slut, as you put it, and I am unfit to rule. I didn't want to be Regent, and having done it for some days now, I like it even less. Consider me to be one of the poorer Purple Dragons you marched and fought beside, serving the realm poorly, because it's the best he can manage."
She spread her hands. "The second thing is this: I had no intention of doing anything more with your son than teaching him a court dance—because I want him, at his age and restlessness, to want to come to Suzail and see the Court and so get swept up into helping Cormyr after my generation falters. The King—the new King—will need men he can trust in, and I need to find them for him... or make them for him."
She took a slow step toward him. "And the third is this, Andur: I need you."

"What?" The stablemaster took a step back, hands rising as if to ward her off.
Alusair smiled crookedly. "Oh, not to bed you, though if you asked nicely..."
Rhauligan rolled his eyes and she made a rude gesture—a gesture familiar to Purple Dragons everywhere in the Realm—in his direction without ever taking her eyes from Andur's shocked gaze.
"I need your service," she continued, taking another step forward, her voice rising. "Your trust. Your loyalty. I need men like you—men who've fought for the realm, and know the blood-price to be paid for Cormyr's laws, pride, good roads, and full bellies—to believe. If not in me, than in the future I'm fighting to bring to the realm. My sister's babe is a long way from being even the shadow of my father, but my mother still rules from behind the throne, as she always did. I still ride with and rally the young nobles of the realm, as I always did. The sun still rises over the Thunder Peaks and sets over the western Storm Horns, as it always has. I need you, Andur Imraith, to keep your sword sharp and suffer no lies from courtier or noble or Regent."
The stablemaster stared at her in silence.
"But do you need me, Andur?" the princess asked softly. "Do you still need someone to love, someone to look up to, someone to fight for? Or is it all over for you but the drinking and the grumbling that things were better in your day, and that the realm's all ruled by a pack of corrupt, wanton fools these days?"
Andur Imraith growled, "I—I'll not serve you. Just keep away from my son. Give me your word on that, then you can kill me."
"I don't want to kill you," Alusair said wearily, "but I do want to rule you. So I'm going to do just that. Shall we dance, stablemaster?"
"No," Andur spat. "I'll not—"
"Shall we fight, then?" Alusair asked softly, eyes glittering.

"No blades, no spells, just fists and the rest that the gods gave us. For Iam a princess and my word is law, Andur of Cormyr, and I give you a choice, one or the other: dance or fight? Dance... or fight?"
"I don't fight women," Andur growled, turning his back on her.
"I'm not a woman, I'm a wanton slut, remember? And Purple Dragons certainly drink deep of those, as I recall."
Andur whirled around, his face twisted. "Don't do this," he hissed. "Don't demean me in front of my son!"
"Just how," Alusair asked, "are you demeaned?" And she strode toward him, reaching for his wrist and his hip as if to take up the dance he'd interrupted earlier.
And with a wild roar, the stablemaster drew back his fist and sent her flying.
Rythra Matcham screamed. Two Purple Dragons grabbed at their sword hilts, and both Rhauligan and Sharantyr winced as they saw Alusair's head whipped around and blood fly.
She landed hard, sending chairs flying, and rolled to her feet slowly—but when she rose, she threw out one hand in an imperious "keep back" signal. There was a stiffness in her gait as she walked back to Andur, who stood unmoving, fists clenched.
"Don't," he growled. "Don't make me do this."
Alusair reached for his wrist and his hip again, her eyes on his. "Dance or fight, stablemaster. Dance or fight."
He slapped her hands away and stepped to one side, shaking his head warningly—and the Steel Princess darted at him.
With a roar he punched at her, once and again, then reached out for a chair to snatch up and fell her—and the reeling princess, on her knees before him, brought both of her hands together up into his crotch as hard as she could, throwing her entire body behind the blow.
Andur Imraith managed a sort of whistle as he flew over her, up, then down, face-first, to greet the floor. Where he landed

senseless, limbs bouncing loosely.
Alusair turned, blood dripping from her ruined lip, one eye already starting to swell shut, and called across the room, "Darnen? That dance we were just starting?"
The stableboy threaded his way through the tables very hesitantly, looking down at his father more than once.
"You didn't—?"
"No," Alusair told him, "he lives—and his face will probably be prettier than mine when he awakens."
Darnen looked at her, then at his father, then back at the princess—and smirked. "Gods, that was—that was wonderful, seeing that! Aye, he's my pa and all, but he's clouted me for years! I—uh—what you said about the Court..."
"I meant it. Want to see Suzail, knights with glittering blades, sages who can tell you stories you can't even dream of—oh, yes, and ladies in dresses cut up to here and down to here?"
Darnen gulped, went as red as the blood dripping off Alusair's chin, swallowed, and nodded.
"L-lady, you're hurt," he stammered.
She smiled at him. "Which might make your choice easier: dance or fight?"
Darnen looked down at his father, gulped again, and said hastily, "Dance."
Andur Imraith whimpered once after his groans had warned the world that he was rejoining it. Then his eyes fluttered open, he groaned again, and found himself looking up into the stony face of Glarasteer Rhauligan.
"Still hungry to beat up princesses?" the Highknight asked. "Or should I ask you if you're still capable of fathering anyone?"
Andur gave him a dark look, but his growl of pain became a wince as Rhauligan hauled him to his feet and helped him to limp to a chair.
"Pa?"

Andur's head jerked up at Darnen's voice and his eyes blazed at the sight of his son standing on the dancing floor with his arms around Alusair.
He rose with a growl that slid into a groan, and hastily sank back down again, face going gray. No one laughed.
He shook his head, and turned almost imploringly to his employer. "I—I can't be taking orders from... from..."
From her seat beside him, Rythra Matcham gazed at him angrily, her lips set in a thin, disapproving line. Oh, she was angry, all right. Angry at him.
Andur blinked at her in surprise.
"From a wanton slut, Andur?" she asked icily. And in a whirl of skirts she rose, strode across the dance floor, drew Darnen away from the princess, and firmly put her own arms around Alusair, her glare back at Andur as sharp and as steady as a sword blade.
"Oh, gods," Andur groaned, hiding his face in his hands. Hands that were taken in a firm grip that brought a slight, spicy perfume with them...
He opened his eyes. Alusair Nacacia Obarskyr was kneeling in front of him, one eye almost closed from his blow and her lip a twisted, swollen ruin. Her cheekbone was gray where it wasn't yellow. Thanks to his fists.
And she was a Princess of the Realm...
"Oh, gods," Andur groaned again.
"Your choice has changed a bit," she murmured. "Dance, fight, or obey."
Andur shook his head, beaten. "Obey," he whispered.
"Good. Very good." With surprising strength she stood up and stepped back, dragging him to his feet. He towered over her, more than a head taller, as she towed him firmly across the room.
To the center of the dancing floor.
Andur winced. "We have to dance, too?"
"Yes," Alusair told him sweetly. "Then see the healers, both of us—then I'm taking you to bed. Your loyal service begins this

night."
Rhauligan and Sharantyr exchanged glances and rolled their eyes in unison. Behind them, the row of Purple Dragons and War Wizards carefully kept their faces expressionless. With some effort.
Andur started to groan again, then met the sudden fire of Alusair's remaining eye and quelled his utterance.
With some effort.